

The Stark Family

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/19242784) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/19242784>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	F/M , Other
Fandom:	Iron Man (Movies) , Marvel Cinematic Universe , Spider-Man (Tom Holland Movies) , The Avengers (Marvel Movies)
Relationship:	Peter Parker & Tony Stark , Pepper Potts/Tony Stark , Harley Keener & Tony Stark , Harley Keener & Peter Parker , James "Rhodey" Rhodes & Tony Stark , Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe) & Tony Stark , Harley Keener & Pepper Potts , Peter Parker & Pepper Potts , Harley Keener & Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe)
Character:	Tony Stark , Pepper Potts , Peter Parker , James "Rhodey" Rhodes , Happy Hogan , Harley Keener , Natasha Romanov (Marvel) , Richard Parker , Steve Rogers , Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe)
Additional Tags:	Tony Stark Has A Heart , Tony Stark-centric , BAMF Tony Stark , Mafia AU , Alternate Universe - Criminals , Tony Stark Will Rule The World , Hurt Tony Stark , Protective Tony Stark , Irondad , No Superpowers AU , Kid Peter Parker , Tony Stark Acting as Peter Parker's Parental Figure , Hurt Peter Parker , Villain Tony Stark , Anti-Hero , Harley Keener Is A Dork , Mental Health Issues , anger issues , Parent Tony Stark , Pepperony - Freeform , Mamabear Pepper , BAMF Pepper Potts , Protective Pepper Potts , Torture , PsychopathicTendencies , Family Fluff , Uncle Rhodey , BAMF Peter Parker , Found Family , Tony Stark being an overprotective dad , Peter Parker Calls Tony Stark "Dad" , Abusive Richard Parker , Big Brother Harley Keener , Tony Stark Has Daddy Issues , Tony Stark Does What He Wants , Parent Pepper Potts , Family Feels , Cuddling & Snuggling , Confident Peter Parker , Timid Harley Keener , Protective Harley Keener , Family Drama , Dysfunctional Relationships , Past Child Abuse , Angst , Self-Hatred , Panic Attacks , Self-Harm , Suicidal Thoughts , Childbirth , Also some potential skullcrushing , A philosophical study focusing on the dichotomy of good and evil
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of The Paradigm Shift
Collections:	Irondad Creators Awards 2021 - Nominations , We'll meet again Don't know where Don't know when , Irondad Creators Awards 2022 , Fics hat are way too good
Stats:	Published: 2019-06-16 Completed: 2021-06-16 Chapters: 40/40 Words: 340507

The Stark Family

by [TonyStarkissist](#)

Summary

Some of his earliest memories were lessons of twisted morality his father taught him as a child, and those lessons have followed him all through his life like a sinewy shadow he's

unable to break free from. Though lately, certain events have chipped away at that very precept.

“Love is an ignorant lie only weak men indulge in, Anthony. It will forever be the downfall of the human race, and it is a weakness we cannot afford. Stark men are not weak.”

And for years, Tony had genuinely believed it.

That is until now- now that he can experience for himself what the warmth of love felt like. Now that he can experience that unrelenting drive to protect, preserve, and provide.

And he’s found that, yes, his father was absolutely correct. His love for his family is his greatest weakness.

... but he’s found that he’s only ever at his strongest when he has someone worth fighting for.

Prologue

An old Cherokee told his grandson:

"My son, there's a battle between two wolves inside us all.

One is Evil.

It's anger, jealousy, greed, resentment, inferiority, lies, and ego.

The other is Good.

It's joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, and truth."

The boy thought about it and said:

"Grandfather, which will win?"

The old man replied quietly:

"The one you feed ."

Edward Stark.

The father of an honored legacy. He was the beginning; the genius founder of the idyllic society he believed the world would one day fall into subjection to.

He was the beginning of an idea; an initiative people would grow to resent. He was a visionary, an innovator, and he understood the overlooked nature of humans. He was a man of science and study of both the mind and the world, and the longer he lived to experience, the more confidence he held of his belief: humanity will one day bring upon its own destruction

The balance of the world was unstable. The inherent goodness of people has been tainted by the vileness hidden in the dark corner of the human heart. Good and Evil? They were one and the same, so intermixed in the going-on's of day-to-day life everyone was none the wiser. The way of the world was changing... and Edward seemed to be the only one who noticed. Humans were evolving in a way science couldn't have foreseen, and the collapse of humanity would be upon them if procedures did not adjust to balance this sudden change.

And now all that's left... a world driven to a point beyond hypocrisy.

It took so little effort to be remembered. An evil man kills a little girl... A good man donates his kidney to a dying boy... who's name will be remembered?

It's always the same story. What is the reward for a good deed? Should there be a reward at all? Does that take away the goodness in it, and replace it with selfish motive? Or, are good deeds only done to have satisfaction in knowing you did something right?

Human nature doesn't agree. It's greedy, selfish, and traitorous.

To be good means to be brave and to rebel against their own instinct, and even when those select few are able to overcome the enemy inside themselves... the next step is making it through life walking alongside the people who resent them for that very goodness, marked as a self-righteous poser to appease their own insecurity... Society didn't tend to like things that believe and act different. History will attest to that.

Edward Stark saw it happen; he saw good men torn down simply because they had a passion and a strong inclination to do what they knew was right. His father had been one of them.

None of them ever stood a chance.

It's like the fate of the universe *wanted* them dead.

Instead, power is given to those unworthy. The ones skillful enough pass to off their evil intent for good. They present freedom with intent to control, and peace with the threat of harm. Humans weren't adept to identifying that kind of twisted manipulation, the human heart instinctually drawn to those promises, hoping it would bring about a better world for themselves and their children. So, to this they are drawn, and their trust exploited and their own minds programmed in such a way they are riddled of any sense of self or free-thinking. Taught there are only ever two sides to a coin, rather than encouraged to realize there is no side at all whilst the coin is spinning.

That Quantum State of justice and morality? That had been Stark's vision.

This was a revelation that spurred the change. He'd tried the world's way... to be a good man by their terms but he had no power to influence a change in the world around him. So, he made a decision, one for the betterment of mankind. Why play by the rules if it didn't get him anywhere? So, he made up his own.

He knew what they thought of him. He wasn't one of the good ones and people were well aware. They knew what to expect of him, they knew when they could trust him and when they could not, because despite the things he did... he was still an honest man and he never acted without reason.

He had seen so many governments lie, steal and fail their people, but yet the people always came crawling back, hanging on to every promise dangled in front of him upon the beginning of yet another deceptive election year. They were trusted and depended on despite their failure, and for some reason... Stark felt that anger boil inside him unlike anything he had ever felt before. These men hold power simply because of their ability to lie and manipulate.

So Edward took that resentment and fed that hungry determination inside him and he used that corrupt regime to his advantage. Soon he had built up a name and a reputation for himself by means of faulty ideals. People *knew* what he was, but in an odd, twisted way it only served to bring him more respect than shame.

In less than a year his name itself became a household conversational topic, juggling a following far bigger than anything a small, packed crime family east of Sicily could ever dream of. He was the king of Eastern Europe, all he needed was a crown. People bowed at the back to bend to his will. He had influence in places no corrupt man like him should ever be allowed to have... but he had it... and it made him a legend.

He was known for his irresistible charisma and unrivaled enterprise born from his genius, masterminded intuition. He basked in the glory and power, and it wasn't long before his fame drifted from a minor corruption of morality to a corrupting sense of greed and the conniving, ruthless, unforgiving torment he inflicted on both the citizens of his hometown and his own powerful organization of followers as a result. Any sense of morality had been consumed by the

unending gnawing in his stomach for more, more, and more power. And for the first time he understood... he understood the problem. But it was too late for him to do anything about it. He'd fallen prey to the evilness in his heart...

He killed without reason or remorse, and at every waking moment he was forced to watch over his shoulder. He was incredibly careful, almost too careful. Too many people were eager to kill him for the power and money he possessed. His genius and quick thinking quickly rode him and his men to the top, side-by-side the Carbonell Family. Both families had authority higher than anyone else in all of Italy, and very few ever dared to challenge the Starks' intellect, or physical capabilities, including the government authorities. It was a new breed of evil, even whispered thoughts of defiance bringing about a heated punishment. They were the best of the best... *He* was the best of the best. That was the only way the man could have lasted as long as he had during their bloody war against the Carbonells - a crime family that had lasted for generations far older than Stark's father's father. They hadn't taken too kindly to this challenge of power. Defeating the Carbonells would be the last notch in his belt, and then he would have all he ever dreamed of.

But then, Leonard Stark had been born by the means of a poor prostitute, trained to take his father's place when the great Edward Stark would no longer be capable, because the man had to make sure his name, and the power that followed it, lived on. He wanted it to thrive and to eventually bring to fruition his original purpose, and Leonard Stark was the perfect genius child to instill those wishes of his father. The elder Stark taught his son all he needed to know, and the boy showed no apprehension about the unfortunate sacrifices that had to be made. His reputation quickly rose to sit right beside his father, rightfully earning the title of Stark heir.

Edward lasted longer than anyone could have expected. The sixty-three-year-old man died at the hands of his brother through the means of oath; Shot in the back. He was the one person Edward had turned his better judgment against, blinded by the trust forged from their childhood friendship. An apostate is what the man had become, and young Leonard Stark was still barely a man at the age of 19 when he took over his father's symbolic throne. His first order as 'King' being to kill his own god-father for the sin of treason and the assassination of Edward Stark, slitting his throat, holding up his head with his hand fisted in the man's hair as he watched the life bleed from his eyes. His corpse was hung from the rafters, body lifeless and on display for everyone to see exactly what would happen when one defied the Stark Family.

Leonard carried on the Stark name with grace and without mercy, just as he had been taught by his father. The organization spread to all corners of Europe to avenge their Father because the Great Leo Stark never took 'no' for an answer, and he was going to do everything in his power to live up to the expectations his father had for him.

The young man had a knack with knives and a rattily patience, or so the stories say. He found himself in prison more often than not in his early years, but soon after the fifth arrest, Leonard learned from his mistakes... and he was never caught again.

He grew more ruthless and obsessed the longer he remained in authority. Going far beyond any of the very few morals his father might have still possessed before his passing.

Leonard ingrained these traits into his own son, Howard, at an early age, and the boy was too ignorant to know any better. His mother had been killed as a young child. Speculation revolved around the murder, and most believed it was Leonard himself that had committed the act after the woman had borne him a viable heir, but none were able to prove it or act upon their suspicions. So, Howard Stark was raised amongst his father's companions, without the tender love and affection of a loving mother to cultivate compassion and mercy. He was treated with the respect of a prince from an early age, and it was not long before he learned to expect it. He was a Stark after all. He

was a determined boy; determined to please his father and to allow his genius to flourish to bring pride to the Stark name.

His first kill was rumored to be his best friend after Leonard discovered the distraction and innocently young-minded opinions the little girl had been corrupting his son with. The 8-year-old Stark had come home with a question bouncing around in his mind, and he just *needed* to ask his father: *isn't it bad to hurt good people?* The instruction to kill and the forced execution calloused the young Howard, and he grew into a calloused, merciless young man, just as his father, forgetting any notion of a label revolving around the words 'good' or 'bad', just as Edward had philosophized. As long as the world kept spinning... so did the coin.

Leonard and his son were only set on appeasing a part of his Edward Stark's: allowing the organization he birthed to flourish in their homeland of Italy; to inflict fear on the people deserving of it... and those not. Though, even despite his descension into treachery Edward's goal had remained, focus centering around future generations, the innovations, and the contributions to making the world a place where humanity could thrive without being restricted by the morals set in place by society and corrupt governments around the globe. Where intelligence and respect flourished for those deserving of the power.

Leo's focus had always been drawn away from the outcome of the future and became plagued with the money, the power, the respect, and fear in the present. He wanted it all for himself. He thrived off it, and his son learned by example to do the same. Soon, the two acquired an estate that would satisfy their families for generations to come, but it was never enough to appease their greed.

Father and son moved a small portion of their men to America, set on expanding their enterprise to one of the most prosperous countries in the world with innumerable opportunities awaiting them. They were consumed by the procurement of money and fear. It blindsided them to the trials and tribulations that would confront them by attempting this venture. They wanted more, and so that's what they fought for. Their numbers grew quickly, and they fought a bloody war behind the scenes of American society. The American people were torn between their homes and the war they fought for their allies. The people were passionate, less driven by fear, and still feeding off that fresh appetite of freedom. This only leads to Leo Stark's inevitable downfall during WWII after turning his back on the "*meager peasants incapable of doing much else than fighting a war that didn't belong to them*". They had had enough of Leonard Stark's unrelenting control.

Following his death came a time of intense chaos, and their home base was nearly in shambles in the aftershock of the loss of their dear leader. This drove numerous Italian crime families to America in hopes of taking charge while the last of the true Stark blood was down, lying belly-up in the American soil during the grieving of his father. It split the enormous organization into pieces at the loss of their leader and fear of the weaknesses that had been exposed. Factions broke off, set on developing their own estate by their own means, and soon a war broke out within the Family, splitting the organization into two equally terrifying parts. Shield was the one to come out victorious in the end.

Outraged by this, Howard hurdled forward, taking his rightful place at the head of his grandfather's and father's organization. His innovative weapons and strategies fueled his men and his own desires. He depended on his gift of knowledge to build his people back to the top, just as his grandfather had in the past. He had lost his father, and he had lost more than half of his father's faithful men. He and the organization had hit rock bottom, but that wasn't enough to deter him from his and his father's goal. He appointed Edwin Jarvis as his second in command and spurred onward. He made a deal with the American government; creating specialized weapons and offering men to them in their time of need towards the end of the war. He aided in the creation of the atomic bomb, and his name would be forever remembered throughout American history as both a ruthless

criminal and a passionate American patriot, despite his Italian descent.

After the war, America was a land riddled with troubles and conflicts between gangs and townspeople. They suffered a harsh debt after the war, and the economic recovery wasn't looking well, so they turned, again, to the Starks for help. A pact was made. The now corrupt American government would disregard any actions committed on behalf of the Stark Family, and in turn, Howard Stark provide monetary support and would slowly eradicate the criminal organizations that had split away from them and those that had followed them to America. Both sides were benefited... America was ridded of the uncontrolled crime, and Stark gained the power to control it.

They thrived. Stark kept his word, and the government kept theirs. The people quickly learned to steer clear, and Stark, after accomplishing as much as he was capable of without risking his own neck, mellowed out, settled down and allowed things to move along however God intended.

Soon, towards his elder years, he met and married his caring wife. The marriage had been executed by means of a peace treaty rather than love. The Starks were lacking a blood heir, and the Carbonell's were standing on their last leg at the mercy of Howard Stark himself. So, Howard chose the daughter of Henry Carbonell as his bride and they married. The two Italian American organizations merged together, under the reign of Howard and Maria Stark. Their numbers doubled, and Howard moved half of his men, and his new wife with him across the states, leaving the other half in the hands of Jarvis to keep their authority strong within the cities.

Westward of New York a few years later, Howard Stark's wife gave birth to their new heir, named after her grandfather, and his grandfather. The great-grandson of two of the most powerful men in European history: Antonio Carbonell and Edward Stark.

Anthony Edward Stark was his name. Neither mother, nor father could possibly have known it at the time as they stared down at the soft bundle cradled in his mother's loving arms, but he'd grow into a man worthy of praise and honor beyond any other being before him.

He would be the best of them.

He would go down a legend.

"You, my son, will rule the world."

He would rule the world.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'm legit so excited about getting into this fic!

“Tony Stark!”

He could hear Rhodey's voice echoing from down the hall before the man ever stepped foot in his office. He sounded unnecessarily irritated, which was not much of a surprise. Tony barely had time to throw his head back and groan out in his frustration before Rhodes was throwing the doors of the office wide open for his dramatic entrance. He had always been one for dramatics... and hissy fits.

“What in the world were you thinking?” Rhodey hissed at him through his gritted teeth.

Someone apparently skipped out on their afternoon nap.

Tony scowled, standing from the chair he had been mindlessly spinning in while his hands toyed around with his old pistol. He tossed the hunk of metal onto his desk and raised a brow at his best friend that had burst into his private office with accusations dripping from his tongue.

“You’re going to have to be more specific, Rhodes. I do many stupid things according to my wife.” He clapped his hands together to expel the blueprints displayed on the hologram above his desk before Rhodes could get a proper peek at them. The man was incredibly nosey, especially when it came to things Tony would rather him not be nosey about. He had an inborn knack for sniffing out his secrets.

Rhodey rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Why did I have to learn from *Allen*, that you decided to send Romanoff on the OsCorp stakeout without any backup or supervision? That was supposed to be our big bust! That took us months of planning and insider intel to set up. After this Norman’s gonna know we know and his security’s gonna be strung up tighter than Fort Knox. *Then* how are we supposed to get our hands on their bioweapons compound and get ‘em shut down? Do you realize how likely it is for her to stumble across some classified intel that sends her hightailing it back to Shield? You said it yourself! She’s a Triple Imposter! She can’t be trusted. I don’t know what went through your head to make you think this was by any means a good idea. This isn’t like you, Boss. Was Pepper not here to knock some sense into you this morning?”

“Stop calling me ‘Boss’ Sour Patch, you know it gives me the willies.” Tony shuddered for the added dramatic effect.

“Just tell me *why*, Tones. I don’t need this headache today. I’ve been too busy covering for you. And I can’t do your job right if you don’t tell me what the hell’s going on with you. You’ve been acting so weird lately. And disregarding protocols that *you* insist on? That’s not like you.”

“Consider it a test of loyalty of sorts.” Tony shrugged in an offhand manner, strutting over to the mini bar beside the assortment of couches across the room to fill a couple glasses with his expensive Scotch.

“That was a damn big test to hand to her, Tony. This was supposed to be an important informant operation. You said so yourself,” Rhodey seethes. His face is puckered with frustration, teeth gritting together, and Tony knows if the man doesn’t cool it down, Rhodey will end up saying something he’ll regret and Tony doesn’t exactly feel like putting him in his place right now. He’s been around this circle too many times with Rhodes to not have already learned the signs. “You know we shouldn’t be trusting her yet. She just cut ties with Shield. For all we know, she’s--”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it Rhodey. I’ve heard it all a thousand times before. You’ve not liked her since she got here. I get it.” Tony forced the cool glass into his friend’s hand, but Rhodey didn’t drink it. “I still can’t believe you don’t trust me though. My right hand for 20 somethin’ years. You’d think by now you’d catch onto my excellent judge of character. Tell me... how many times have I been wrong?” He smiled with a familiar cheekiness that would have had Pepper scowling and rolling her eyes to high heaven. He collapses into the fancy chair behind his long desk with a large stack of cash displayed beside an old picture frame of Howard and Maria Stark and a box of special imported cigars from Nicaragua—a special gift from a couple drug-running pals he helped out a couple months back. He plucked one out of the box and spun it between two of his fingers as he looked around for a lighter while taking a long sip from his glass of whiskey.

“Are we referring to recent events? Because if so, then quite a fucking bit.” Rhodey bites out, scowling at him. He apparently didn’t find the situation quite as amusing and trivial as Tony did. He never did.

Such a mood killer.

“That wasn’t my fault,” Tony points a finger at him. “That was all Obie and you know it.” Tony found his light. He placed the cigar between his lips and lit it. He puffed out a few quick smokes and pulled it away from his lips for another drink.

“Tony, Buddy. Listen--,” Rhodey sighed, “--no thanks.” He shook his head when Tony silently offered him a cigar from his box and continued, “I get that you’re still going through... a tough time after Afghanistan and the thing with Stane, and I think you should take a little time off to cool down and regroup. They messed you up pretty bad over there.” Rhodey took note of the deep frown that settled across Tony’s face at the mention of Afghanistan and former partner. Then his gaze traveled to the long, gangly scar trailing down the side of Tony’s cheek made prominent by the smooth skin of his face uninterrupted by smile lines. “Stane’s dead, and you took care of the Insurgence that rose up because of it. And that was good Tony, it needed to be done. But that consisted of nearly half our men. And now you’ve cut our ties with the DoD, so the *President* is pissed at you. And all this is having terrible effects on the actual company which we need to continue our laundering process.” Rhodey rubs his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut like just the reminder of all Tony’s recent spontaneous decisions gives him a headache. “People think you’ve gone insane and soon we’ll lose all our respect from the local territories. We don’t have enough numbers to project strength and we have no more government protection besides Rogers and I doubt even his backbone is strong enough to stick with us under all this pressure! People are startin’ to get cocky ever since word’s spread about your little spat with Stane and Ross and it’s like your word has no more authority.” He looked at his friend with a placating raise of his brows. “They’re testing us, and things are getting out of hand out there. People aren’t listenin’ like they used to, and I don’t know how much longer we can go on like this without starting some sort of turf war, Tony. And you and I both know we don’t have enough hands right now to handle it.”

Tony’s expression remains stern and unbothered. A couple more puffs of his cigar to accentuate his mean glare with a cloud of smoke and a small snarl pulls at his lips; no answer.

“I think you just need some time away to relax. Let me take over things for a little while. You

should take Pepper back to Italy, or France before the baby comes... Paris even. I trust you Tony, I really do, but it's only been two months since that shitstorm. To any other person that would have been an irreparable trauma. No one could come back from that and just be able to go about business as usual. You haven't had a moment's break and things are only getting more and more stressful. You need to take a break if not for yourself, then for us," he gestures to the room, "your putting all of this into jeopardy. And I don't blame you, I don't. I get it... the trauma is blinding your judgment just a tad--"

Tony's neutral frown instantly bites into an angry scowl, teeth bared and cigar hanging loosely from his mouth. His abduction wasn't a light manner to discuss, and Rhodes knew better. Did the man think he didn't know those Afghan terrorists didn't screw him the hell up? Every day is just a constant projection of thoughts unwinding around the spool of dark memories in his head and he has to live through the panic all over again, accelerating and accelerating until he's desperate for them to slow down so he can take a fucking breath! It wasn't how a man like him should react to trauma, he *knows* ... but that does *not* mean his judgment is skewed. He's as sharp as ever. No amount of damage can change the fact that he's a level-headed criminal mastermind... and he's a Stark. He had developed a high tolerance for pain and stress from a youthful age thanks to his father. But then his chest tightened... remembering how *different* it had been stuck in that cave. For a fleeting moment he remembers that desperation clawing at the inside of his lungs as he waited for the dull knife to finish slicing into the meat of his face. The blood in his throat spilling from his broken nose and jaw as his face was beaten in again and again, blocking out his choked growls of pain as they sliced open the skin of his chest and back to let his sacred 'Stark Blood' pool along the dirty cave floor. Bones broken, infections festering, and all hope of survival completely sucked from his body.

But none of it affected him. It *didn't* . Because he was a man of strength and honor. Never to give in to demands. Never to listen or obey because *he* was the one to be obeyed... Just as his father had taught him to be.

He finds his way back to the present and he can breathe again... The sting of the knife still trailed along his skin but he could breathe now, so he looked up. But Rhodey's form morphed, and his father was left standing in his place, glaring down at him with a belt in his hand for the fear and panic stuttering in his son's chest at the mere mention of a trying event.

He was a Stark.

"Stark men are not weak, Anthony! Stark men are made of Iron, and I will not put up with a feeble heir such as yourself." The memorable words echo one last time before he's standing back in front of James Rhodes. Heart beating fast, and the panic quickly displacing itself into anger.

"Don't you dare accuse me of such things Rhodes," Tony snarls with an uncharacteristic hoarseness in his voice. It trembled with tension, making it all the more threatening. He stood from his chair as he forced his glass of Liquor onto the wooden desk with a loud slam and he tore his cigar from between his lips. "I am Tony Stark! I do not suffer trauma and I never will. I was there for one month! That's practically child's play. You act as if I've never been abducted and tortured before. I've seen more horrors than your mind can even begin to conjure my friend. Those Afghan terrorists are just a sorry group of wannabes that had simply bit off more than they could chew when they came after me. I escaped, didn't I? I left with more intel than we could have ever gained otherwise. If I had so needed, I could have left at any time I wanted! But I *stayed* ! I am not weak and I'd appreciate not being treated as such. My actions are sound, and my thoughts are clear just as they always are. Contrary to popular belief, I know *exactly* what I am doing."

"Tony, I'm not trying to say--"

“Don’t!” He commanded loudly, shooting his friend a scathing glare while he rounded the desk to jab an accusing finger in Rhodes’ chest. “I don’t want another *peep* out of you. You hear me?! You do your job. You follow my orders. And you trust my judgment blindly. Do I make myself clear?”

They were face to face, noses brushing against each other as they both heaved angered breaths into the other's face. Rhodes had never done well with taking orders, but he was damn good at giving them.

Their eyes were locked in a stubborn stand-off, waiting for the eventual submission of the other. This challenge of authority between them wasn’t unprecedented, but then Rhodey saw Stark’s gaze darken with a threatening undertone that had never been there during their showy flaunts before. It was rare to see Tony’s anger flare so heatedly. His emotions were always kept in check-- no matter the situation he was in. So, with a quick, submissive flicker of his eyelids, Rhodey turned away and tipped his chin down. He wasn’t stupid enough to challenge Anthony Stark while he was immersed in a rare fit of rage. The Starks were not known for their mild temper.

“I understand, Tony. I’m just concerned.” His head remained bowed, and he took a single step away as Stark raised his chin in an ostentatious display of dominance.

“I know you are Rhodes, and I appreciate it, but I need you to trust me on this. I have everything under control. Despite what you may think, I *do* have a plan. I’m just weeding out the bad eggs first,” he sighed, “and there seems to be many more than I had anticipated.”

“Of course-” Rhodes made a move to leave the room. He rarely experienced Tony’s direct anger, and it made his gut swirl anxiously. He knew which buttons not to press and by that he had earned Tony’s respect and the title of his best friend. So, usually, he was just the one snickering on the sidelines as Tony tears into some poor soul after they went a bit too far after a long day. It was sometimes hard to remember the intensity and authority his friend possessed when he was privileged enough to see the man act as his usual fun-loving, carefree self while his men weren’t around. He spun on his heel stiffly, prepared to flee to his own office to let Tony cool down, but the office doors flew open again and a very angry, pregnant Pepper Stark stalked through the doors he’d thrown open earlier.

“Anthony Stark,” she mused dangerously. Rhodes watched in modest amusement as the man’s face paled, stripped of any anger and confidence he had pressed upon Rhodey earlier as his wife strode into the room with her own fury radiating off her reddened cheeks. Rhodey swore he saw her hair glint a fiery red around her, acting as a beaming halo for the devil herself. “What is this I hear about you sending Romanoff out by herself? To Oscorp?”

It was clear who held the most authority of the three in the room.

“Hon,” Tony began, an apologetic smile gracing his lips as he carefully reached out to her as if he were afraid she might lash out, “now’s really not a good time. I just-”

“Tony,” Pepper barked, silencing him, “I’ve been gone for a day. *One Day* .” Then she turned her glare onto Rhodey when she noticed him in the room as well. “Did you encourage this?” She stared him down with a harsh glare for a moment before waving it off. “Of course you didn’t; you have some goddamn sense. Tony, what in the world were you thinking? Honey, you’re usually so good about these things.”

“Sweetheart, it’s okay. I sent Hogan to chaperone at a distance. I’m not completely brainless, I promise.”

“Happy?!” She shrieked, “you sent *Happy* to follow that woman by himself? That poor man will be

torn to shreds if Romanoff finds him trailing her.”

Tony’s gaze hardened again in minor annoyance. It was frustrating when the people closest to him were incapable of trusting his decision making. Although, he supposed he deserved it considering he’s kept them in the dark for the majority of his reasoning. In their eyes, it wasn’t outlandish to assume he had officially gone insane.

“Romanoff knows the rules, Dear. She won’t lay a finger on Hogan. Now, I believe Bruce ordered you to take it easy. Or had I misheard? That means no more work. No more stressing over work. No more *thinking* about work... You let me handle this, alright? I can get along without your amazing help for a little while. I promise not to permanently destroy our reputation during your absence.”

“I can’t believe I’ve been put on bed rest and I’m not even six months pregnant, yet,” she muttered under her breath. “This is all your fault.”

“It’s your own fault for worrying about me so much, Hon,” Tony smiled teasingly.

Pepper put up a defiant challenge, placing her hands on her hips and ignoring his jab to get her riled up. “Sometimes I wish I could understand that brain of yours. You better not drive us into the ground. I know I wouldn’t do very well in prison.”

“Nobody will be going to prison,” Tony mused with an amused chuckle, gesturing for his wife to approach the desk he was leaning up against. “Captain Rogers and Lieutenant Barnes still have us covered on that front, thankfully, and you, my dear, are off limits. Everyone knows better than to so much as look at you twisted, so there is no need for you to worry. I won’t let anything happen.” He placed a calloused hand over her protruding belly and smiled warmly as he gently stroked the soft layer of fabric covering her swelled stomach.

“Hmm. I would still appreciate it if you’d stop sending death threats to every man that looked at me sideways.” She snarked with a tiny smile. “Sometimes it can be rather flattering, y’know.”

“I won’t *actually* kill them unless they deserve it. You know that.” He grinned, and she rolled her eyes fondly.

“Yes, but *they* don’t.”

“Yes, that’s the point.”

Rhodes turned his back to the pair to give them privacy. He always hated intruding on the intimate moments between Stark and his wife.

Tony hummed and smiled in amusement when he saw the man’s positioning towards them, and he tipped his head down to peck his wife quickly on the lips. “I won’t stand for any man looking at you sideways. They know better. Now get back to bed. I need you to stay healthy, Hon. You are carrying some very precious cargo in here.” He glanced down at his hand where it rested atop her baby bump.

“Let’s just hope she turns out to be nothing like you, hmm?” She smiled lovingly as she gave him one last meaningful kiss before pulling away from him. “I’m still angry about Romanoff, by the way. You should have at least run it by me.”

“I know sweetheart, but there’s no need for you to stress about it. Just focus on yourself and our baby girl... I don’t need a troublesome birth giving us a scare bad enough to prevent another. She’ll need a trusty second-in command y’know.”

Pepper gives him a look, an exasperated but amused chuckle pushing past her lips.

“Let’s see how we handle the first one before we start planning for another, yeah?” Pepper smiled. She turned to Rhodes. “Keep him in line Rhodey. Goodness knows I can’t keep an eye on him all the way from the penthouse.”

Rhodey bowed his head to her respectfully, gracing her with a smirk of his own as she exited the room with the unflappable grace that only Pepper Stark could muster. Then, he turned to look back at his friend with a wicked grin.

“You’re totally whipped.”

“Shut up.”

Chapter 3

The month he had spent in Afghanistan had been one of his more enlightening experiences. It wasn't exactly what he had expected it to be when he had made the decision to personally investigate the foreign terrorist organization, but it had been a necessary evil. To know if OsCorp was really in cahoots with them was very vital for him to know, and he couldn't trust many to know of his suspicions.

Of course, he'd had his fair share of torture before; stabbed, whipped, shot, strangled, electrocuted, waterboarded really anything an amateur could think up. Yet, being there... in that cave for two weeks... it was different.

He couldn't remember his blood always being quite so crimson. Or the pain always being quite that potent. His screams had never run his throat quite that raw before, either. Every small part of his body was constantly straining against the never-ending physical exertion he'd been inflicted with.

There was a desperation in him he had been unfamiliar with.

He's always been prepared to die; ever since he was a young teenager. He was raised to walk into every fight or conflict knowing that only two outcomes will ever result. He'll win... or he'll die. And he's always been at peace with knowing that one day his life will end by satisfying the wish of every Stark before him; an honorable death. He's come close more times than he could count, and never had it fazed him to dread over what 'could have been' if he hadn't sensed the knife aimed at his back, or the sniper lurking along the dark roofs through the night. He was prepared to die at every moment... yet that time had been different ... For the first time, he was tempted to beg for his life. He was afraid. And God was he tempted. He didn't want to die; not yet.

Maybe it was just because it had been so long since he truly suffered. He'd gone soft, sitting up in his ivory Tower, the world rushing to fulfill his every demand. Or maybe it was because he had something to lose, unlike the previous times. Pepper had just found out she was pregnant, and they were both beyond ecstatic to be given a second chance to bring their very own baby into the world. It was also the first time he'd been taken since he'd fallen in love... Maybe his father was right. Love had made him soft.

Or, it could have been the fresh betrayal that made the sting even worse. Months before his kidnapping he had had an odd feeling about Stane, and Oscorp too, which had led to his initial investigation in the first place. The man had been more of a father to him than Howard had ever been and learning of his betrayal was nearly as devastating as Jarvis' death when he was a boy, the man that had practically raised him.

All it had taken were a few phone wires, and hacked account statements before he was able to hold the physical evidence in his hands. The paper had felt rough and textured against his clammy fingers, and the weight of just the few documents made his arms tremble with exertion. Or maybe it had been the anger. It had to be, because only moments later he threw his glass of half drunken whiskey against the wall with an enraged shout. The glass shattered and the papers fell out of his hand... Stane was conspiring with Osborn, Ross, and as he later found out, Razza himself. The man had wanted him dead; gone for good, but for the life of him, Tony couldn't figure out why. Stane wouldn't have received any benefits from his death, because the organization and SI would go straight to Pepper and Rhodey, and nothing would really change on that front. Instead of confronting him, the mystery of 'why' and the desperation to prove his own theory wrong drew him to follow Stane's paper trail to the redacted location in Afghanistan; to the Ten Rings. He hadn't

spoken a word of it to anyone, he didn't know where their loyalties lied, to him or to Stane... not even Rhodey. So, he had gone alone and it all went just according to Obie's plan. He should've known Stane wasn't so careless. Tony had gone right for the bait just like Stane knew he would... and he suffered because of it.

He had come across something much more valuable during his time, though. Through the beatings and the torture, the Afghan terrorists had unknowingly answered most all of his questions and then some. They hadn't exactly planned on him escaping with the knowledge. But he did... and he'd been working ever since to right the wrongs that had become because of his carelessness.

There was a special project Stane had been feeding Tony's time and research into. What it was and what it was for? He was still working that out. There hadn't been much time to sit and reinvent the few schematics he could still remember since he got back. There was too much work that needed to be done. All he knew was that both the government and Oscorp still had something to do with it and they were the key to figuring it out.

Obadiah's plan to kill him would have turned out if Razza hadn't held onto him in hopes he still had one last golden egg to offer. Obie hadn't underestimated him, but the Razza had and none of them lived long enough to regret it. He wandered back home, driven by his overwhelming fury, eager to rain it down on the man he once used to look to as a father, but he was killed before he was ever able to; assassinated by Natasha Romanoff herself just before he arrived home.

No one else had known the truth, and Tony waltzed through the front doors, bloody and broken and burning with rage just in time. Everyone came to a standstill at the sight of him. Romanoff stood passively while Rhodey held his gun to her head in the midst of his interrogation, Stane's body sprawled out on the floor with a bullet in his skull. He'd arrived just in time to save her hide... and she's yet to reveal how she had learned the truth about Obadiah.

It was a traumatic few months for the organization, especially considering that a fair number of his men had been loyal followers to the deceitful man. A violent civil war broke out that had left the streets and much of the tower a bloody body littered mess. He's still convinced there were traitors lurking in the shadows, disciples of Obadiah waiting for the right time to finish what the man had started. It was a much larger operation anyone would have suspected. So, over the next two months he cleansed his following, slowly weeding out the remaining traitors and working tirelessly to find what secret the man had died hiding. He still wasn't quite sure of who he should trust even after all the men he'd killed during the purge. His worst fear is to find out Rhodey was among them. Obadiah had been as much Rhodey's mentor as his.

Later, he confronted Ross, and as expected, the man denied any involvement. So, Tony cut ties, and Ross wasn't happy. And Tony and his men lost the support and protection of the American government within the course of only a day, and now he and his men were being hunted down by mercs on the black market like it was a sport. At one point he had considered Ross to be an ally... turns out he was wrong about that too.

He does his best to protect the men he still has. Most that had remained faithful stuck around, but there were still several that bounced as soon as times got rough. They were lucky he was a considerate Don; most wouldn't have made it out of the city without being hunted down if it were any other time. One doesn't just *leave*, but some shit happened, and Tony decided to make an exception this once. Even SI got a hit, probably more so, now that their weapons contracts with the government left them without the stability they needed to counterbalance working for a man that was rumored to be a deadly criminal. Now with the extra room and the housing quarters half empty, that meant it was time for some fresh blood. Those with no other place to go. Most were young, having been displaced after violence broke out through New York during his rumored death

in Afghanistan He gave them food to eat, a place to stay, and a family to fight for. Training, and education if they needed it. Both men and women that had been a part of the business were drawn to that, and he had plenty of groupies eager to work with him so it would only be a matter of time and effort of getting them ready for the field. Lawful Evil is what the locals loved to call him, whatever the hell that meant, but it sounded accurate enough.

He was going to be picky this time around though. He wasn't going to make the same mistake... he needed his people uncorrupted and trainable, room for trust to grow and flourish naturally. He didn't need mindless brutes, with menacing snarls and no sense of justice; he needed undying loyalty, trust, and strength in numbers. He needed people with good intentions, willing to follow his orders society called wrong to accomplish something that was right. Some things just couldn't be fixed without it. The world was falling apart, and somebody needed the strength to stitch it back together. So far he's the only one standing up to the challenge.

Outsiders may call it stupid, but he'd never really cared what outsiders had to say.

His numbers have grown since The Cleanse. The few men that had stayed after his spat with Stane were working tirelessly to train the new recruits whilst also working through their tasks to weed out any weak Oscorp links they could bring back for interrogation. It was a long, grueling process, but they were so close. He was so close to finding an answer to his questions...

Tony could feel it... It'd been a week since he had sent Romanoff out, and there was no word from her yet. There was no way of telling how well his judgment had been when it screamed for him to trust her just this once. She only saved his ass the one time... which wasn't exactly much to base her entire character off of.

But, really, she was his only hope at this point. She was quick, precise, and she knew what she was doing. They needed answers; and they needed them soon, because who knew how long he had before the world fell to pieces at the hands of these deceitful men and women put into power.

He had also sent a couple of new rookies on a busy trip to get them out of his and Rhodey's hair. Happy, their usual buffer, was gone, tailing Romanoff, and the pair of brothers just hadn't seemed to know how to handle the man's absence. He wasn't really expecting much out of them; they were new and about as dense as Tony could tolerate, but he should have held more confidence for them because here he was... with a new lead. A link to Oscorp's deepest secrets just waiting for him to sink his nails into. An easily breakable link with just a little prodding done right, or so he's been told. If this young man knew what Tony thought he did... it'd be more than he could have ever hoped for. He was a messenger boy, and typically messenger boys knew much more than people usually gave them credit for.

He hated these things, though. Hated it; hated it. They were ridiculously boring, time-consuming, and quite messy depending on his level of patience that day. There were the criers... they cried a lot, and then there were those rare brave souls that liked to spit in his face. Those were the instances when he typically lost his cool. It really was one of the worst parts of his job.

He ran a hand down his face before reaching up to muss back his dark hair with his fingers. Then, with one last tug of his collar, he threw open the door of the old conference-like room with his chin held in the air, eyes glowering down at the older boy tied to the chair at the center of the room. He ignored the sudden voice in his head upon his initial observation. He looked young, sure... but he's known plenty of late bloomers that used that to their advantage. More often than not, they ended up receiving that well-deserved ass kicking.

"Alright, let's cut to the chase," Tony sighed with a scowl of irritation and boredom, lifting his hand to examine his father's old gun, nonchalantly, flicking at imaginary dust lingering on the

metal frame.

“Have you heard any whispers of Norman working with a man named Razza? Or an Obadiah Stane? Anything you know about their little group project?”

The kid didn't say anything. His eyes blown wide, puffy with the strain of unshed tears, and his face screwed into a firm, angered scowl.

Tony could tell he was going to be a crier, and Tony couldn't exactly judge him if he did. Heck, if his father hadn't been the way he was, Tony would have probably turned out to be a sensitive little crying bitch too. Some people just weren't built to be in their line of work, and this young man most definitely wasn't. At least, not at his age. Those Oscorp goons probably tore him apart with how young looking and small he was for his age. Usually they went for the beffier, meaner brutes, but he'd admit this kid was a wise choice to tote along their more sensitive information. With the whole innocent, young kid facade, nobody would ever guess he was working for Osborn. Perfect cover.

“Hey,” Tony growled, taking one large step forward and grasping the young man's jaw in his hand tightly, twisting it to the side uncomfortably so his head was forcefully bent into a submissive position. He didn't have the patience for this today... and the quicker he was able to scare the shit out of this kid, the quicker he'd get his answers. “Answer me when I speak to you.”

He didn't raise his voice. He rarely ever raised his voice. That was his father's go-to technique and Tony hadn't been rather fond of it, and even as a young child Tony had taken note of how little respect that yields. His father defined respect the same as fear... his mother did not. And through his years of experience he's come to agree with his mother. Besides, he found the cold and leveled tone to be even more effective in certain instances.

So, he hardened his glare and squeezed the young man's jaw harder between his strong fingers without uttering another word. It made the pitiful whimper that emitted from the kid all the more prominent. Tony subtly loosened his grip, but he kicked his foot against the chair to rock it backward in order to compensate, leaving his intimidating form towering over the boy. “You better start talking, kid. I'm not known for my unwavering patience.” He cocked back the hammer of the revolver held loose in his other hand as a warning and the boy visibly gulped.

“I'm sorry,” he finally broke; voice wavering and body shaking. “I-I-I don't know anything.”

“Yes, you do,” Tony droned and scoffed as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, “you really think I'd be wasting my time here with you if you didn't? I'm a busy man Kid. I've got things to do, places to be.”

“I-I don't-I don't know. I-I'm just the messenger.”

Tony groaned and rolled his eyes, releasing him from his hold and letting the chair drop back to its original position so he could scrub his face with his hand. He stepped away from the cowering kid casually, the hand holding his gun falling limp at his side as he repressed the urge to scream out in frustration. *He can't stand this* . “Yes, I *know* you're the messenger, Keener. But what I need to know is *what* message you were delivering and to *who* ?”

“I-I-I don't think I'm allowed to tell you-”

“Oh, for Pete's sake,” Tony sighed dramatically, throwing his hands in the air. He flicked the safety back in place and tossed his gun to the side on the table beside him. The kid's eyes followed the weapon fervently. “I hate these things. Why do you make me do this Rhodes? They're so

annoying. I can't stand it."

"It's funny to watch you squirm." Rhodey grinned in amusement, leaning up against the door with his arms crossed over his chest as he watched his Boss make a spectacle of himself in front of the young man.

"Yeah, of course, you'd think so," Tony drawled snarkily, making a face at his friend to show his annoyance.

He turned his attention back on the kid tied to the chair.

"Alright, listen up, Kid. Harley? That's your name, right?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Aww, look at that. He's polite *and* respects my authority. How refreshing." He shoots a pointed look at Rhodes leaning against the door before grabbing a chair and dragging it over to take a seat right in front of the kid. He supposed it was an appropriate time to change tactics.

He could use a few more recruits anyways...

"Anyways," he clasped his hands together and leaned forward in his seat to stare at him intently. "I'm gonna make a deal with ya."

"Tony, please," Rhodey groaned, "we can't recruit any more useless hands. We can't just feed and home every scraggly looking stray you feel inclined to adopt. Happy's already got his hands full as it is."

"C'mon Rhodes, look at him," Tony gestured to the older boy. His skinny framed body with moussed up hair and bruised cheeks shining with tears made him look so much younger. "He's what, Eighteen? Nineteen? He's Just a kid."

"Fourteen." Harley corrected softly, chin falling to his chest to stare at his lap.

Maybe not so much younger...

"By Golly! You're still a baby!" Tony shouted, horrified with himself for causing a little kid to cry the way he did. "What in the world are you doing in this business kid? Don't you got an Xbox or PlayStation to keep you entertained? Get some GTA for god's sake, it's basically like the same thing. Literally, anything that wouldn't end in you getting killed? Gosh." He threw his hands up in frustration, collapsing into the back of his chair exasperatedly and turning to shoot Rhodey a look.

The kid didn't say a word. He kept his gaze fixed on his lap.

"Shit," Tony muttered as he turned to look at the kid, grimacing in pity. He wouldn't wish this kind of childhood on anybody, but it was too late for Keener. He'd gotten involved with things he would never be able to walk away from. He knows too much.

"Fourteen..." Tony sighed, furrowing his brows. "Where are your parents?"

The boy's face screwed into another angry scowl at the mere mention.

"Dad left... I picked up some odd jobs for OsCorp and they killed my mom and sister when I pulled something kinda stupid," the kid muttered tightly. "They promise not to kill me too as long as I don't mess up again. And they give me a place to stay when it gets cold."

Tony's chest tightened. He glanced at the dark bruise on the kid's right cheek and his chest rumbled with his angry growl. Oscorp had never been good at following the rules, and this quivering kid in front of him was proof of that. Kids were strictly off-limits. Everyone knew that, but Osborn did it anyway. That just made Tony Stark all that more peeved.

"It's my fault..." the kid whispered through a choked breath. The scowl on Tony's face melted into a sad frown as he looked down at him. A lone teardrop fell from his cheek and landed on his lap and the kid hurriedly brushed away the others before they could fall.

"No, it's not," Tony responded firmly. The kid flinched back at his tone and that made the bubbling anger *boil* in Tony's stomach, heart beating erratically, feeling the heat climb up the side of his neck. No kid should blame themselves for a thing like that. He wouldn't stand for it. The kid was too young to carry that kind of guilt.

Thankfully, Harley didn't say anything to argue. Hands folded in his lap and lips thinned from the sudden scolding.

"Y'know," Tony started again after a lengthy silence, releasing a breath to summon some self restraint, "I think with a little work and a little mentoring, you'd make a fine con-man. You can see it in your eyes, Kid." He made sure to lace his tone with as much sincerity and kindness he could muster and Harley's wide-eyed gaze snapped up to stare at him in bewilderment. Tony found the fear and innocence endearing; a change of pace from the usual fearless tough exterior he was used to. Or the immediate pansies falling to their knees, begging for their lives.

But this kid was scared. Damn scared. Like scared enough to shit his pants if Tony had raised his voice enough. But he kept his wits about him and retained his loyalty despite that fear. He was exactly what Tony's been looking for; young, moldable, and dripping with potential.

"Con-man? Like-like a real con-man con-man?" Harley questioned nervously; chin tucked close to his chest as he cast his eyes upwards to stare hopefully at the man.

"Well, what other kinds of con-man are there?" Tony chuckled, looking at the kid with an amused twinkle in his eyes. Harley didn't say anything after that and he returned his gaze back to his lap, stubbornly.

Tony sighed. "Look, Keener. I've never been big on the hurting kids thing. I won't do it, and I don't like when other people do it, but... I really need this kiddo. I know what Oscorp does to kids like you and I'm willing to give you a good starting position here, under strict supervision, of course. You'll be safe here, but you have to give me what I need to know first. I can't trust you otherwise."

"How-how do I know that you're not just lying to me to get what you want? I'm not a complete idiot, y'know. I-I-I mean... you're *Tony Stark*."

"Well, I'm not lying," Tony answered, trying to repress the smirk at the kid's sudden onset of snarkiness. "But if you'd prefer not to tell me... we can just wait for my good man Hogan to get back and he can make sure you're escorted straight back to Oscorp. They can take care of you over there however they handle business. It's really no big deal to me. I'll get what I need either way eventually."

That was a bald-faced lie. He'd never do anything of the like... but the kid didn't need to know that.

"You-you can't just let me go? I-I can't go back to Oscorp after this! They'll kill me for getting

caught so easy! They'll kill me just 'cause they can! You just said you didn't like it when people hurt kids, and they'll hurt me!"

"I know kid," Tony smiled sympathetically, "that's why I'm giving you this once in a lifetime opportunity. Either you tell me what I want to know now, get in good with the most powerful man from across the globe, and be protected by the wrath of Osborn and his men, or... get kicked to the street with the risk of the Oscorp vultures hunting you down after finding out you were their weak link, then finding yourself dead in a gutter five miles east of Nevada. Take it or lose it, kid. I'll give you ten minutes to think about it."

Then, with that Tony stood gracefully from the chair, clapped the boy once on the shoulder, grabbed the gun he'd discarded on the table earlier, and moved out of the room with Rhodey following close behind him. His temper had flared, and his determination to drive Oscorp into the ground was stronger than he'd ever felt it. He hated anyone who had the audacity to lay a finger on an innocent kid and his family. He'd never let it pass before, and he wasn't about to start now.

They knew the rules.

Chapter 4

Tony snuck up to his bedroom door to catch a glimpse of his wife relaxing in their bed and a smile spread across his face, immediately, the magic of a simple smile easing the stress in his mind. Her back was pressed up against the headboard and she held a book propped up on her protruding belly. His day was finally over, and he could finally spend some quality time with his family. The prospect of being a father used to terrify him, but time seems to have warmed his heart just a tad and now the mere thought made him genuinely ecstatic. The idea of a small, innocent having no choice but to love him so abundantly... it made him want to have a million of them. Just a million tiny people he could trust and love and be loved in return.

It was one of the few things he wished for as a child: a family. It wasn't exactly in the terms he had been meaning back then, but this more than works for him now. This tiny thing growing inside the stomach of his beautiful wife; it was nothing short of a miracle, and he was determined to break the family curse and be the best father he could be to his baby girl, because she only deserved the best.

Pepper looked up from her book when she heard him come in and he was greeted with her warm smile. She closed her book with a finger wedged between the pages to keep her place and then she asked about his day, just as she did every day, without fail.

Tony answered her questions as he hurriedly shed off his jacket, draping it over a chair. He toed off his shoes last as he approached the bed and Pepper laughed out loud as he collapsed on his side of the bed with a breathy 'oof'. She leaned over to press a warm kiss to his lips as a 'welcome home'. He grinned against her mouth and ran his calloused hand along her baby bump, leaning up to pepper her lips and neck with sweet, sweet kisses like he was starved for the contact.

"I missed you," he whispered against her mouth.

"You always miss me," Pepper answered with a smug smile. Tony growled playfully and gave her one more quick peck before falling against the mattress with a content sigh. His hand remained in place on her stomach, and he caressed the soft skin peeking out of the loose tank top she was wearing, with smooth strokes of his thumb.

"How's my little Princess doing today?" He smiled, wiggling his body so he was comfortably sprawled out on his side, his face pressed close to the side of her belly. He lifted her shirt, sensually, to reveal the soft skin beneath and pressed a long, lingering kiss to the side.

Pepper smiled and used one hand to open her book, and the other to thread through her husband's soft hair, slightly matted and crisp from the gel he's prone to using, but she worked it out until all that was left was the soft, fluffy feel.

"Maguna," Tony cooed in a babyish voice. "How was your day today? Did Mommy read you lots of boring stories? Did she complain about Daddy a lot? Did she say mean things about me?" He whispered against her skin softly, shooting his wife a playful glare. "Don't listen to her. They're all lies." He pressed another sweet kiss to her bare belly and ran his beard along the sensitive skin just because he knew it tickled.

Pepper smirked at him, looking down from her book. "Don't listen to Daddy sweetheart," Pepper hummed, rubbing her hand down her stomach, pausing over Tony's hand to intertwine their fingers briefly, "Mommy's always right."

Tony scoffed at her, but then he felt a small kick against the palm of his hand and he grinned

excitedly. "I love you too baby." He answered, pressing several more kisses to her belly. Another kick. "What's that?" He feigned surprise. "You want to hear a story? Okay, I'll tell you a nice story. Lemme think..." He taps his chin thoughtfully as he runs his fingers along the spot he had felt the two kicks.

He was just about to begin when JARVIS spoke up.

"Boss, Romanoff has returned... I feel this matter is urgent. Rhodes is acting rather huffy about who she's returned with. He's requesting you come down and take care of things."

Tony groaned, dropping his forehead against his wife's swollen belly. Pepper's fingers threaded through his hair once more before she pulled away, focusing intently on her book.

"Rhodes," he muttered under his breath. "He gets so pissy sometimes."

"Be careful," Pepper murmured, looking up to settle him with a subtle 'I told you so' look in her eyes before returning to her book as her husband climbed off the bed.

"Always." He ignored the look just to annoy her and leaned over to press a quick goodbye kiss to her forehead.

"And don't you dare come back in this room with blood on your clothes. I hate the smell."

"Of course, Hon. I'll be sure to wash up before I come back in. I'll be back soon." He pauses, and falls against the bed last minute and places a hand on her belly again, pressing a kiss right above her belly button. "Daddy's gotta go back to work Princess. I'll be back soon and I'll tell you the best story ever." Then he stood up once more and grabbed his black jacket and his father's old revolver on his way out the room. He shrugged the jacket on and tucked the revolver into the waistband of his pants as he made his way through their penthouse, towards the elevator.

"What's got dear ol' Rhodey's panties in such a twist this time 'round, JARVIS?" He asked, reaching up to slick his hair back from where Pepper had ruined it, then reaching down to right the collar on his shirt once the elevator doors shut behind him.

"Ms. Romanoff brought a guest back with her, sir." The elevator began its descent and Tony narrowed his eyes at the shiny, reflective door to find the right facial expression for the occasion. He reached behind him to pull out his gun. He admired the barrel, stroking the muzzle lovingly. Then he snapped the cylinder out to count his shots before snapping it back in place and spinning it playfully. He had always been fascinated by his father's revolver ever since he was a small child. He'd witnessed his first murder at the hands of that gun, and he'd committed his first the very same.

Ever since his parents' prompt death several years ago, he'd claimed the weapon as his own, and he had no plan to rid himself of the beautiful piece anytime soon, despite the numerous advanced weaponry he'd created himself. The revolver had been a creation of Howard Stark; one of his first. Tony wasn't nostalgic by any means, and he hated his father for the things he did, but in an odd way, he still had a professional respect for the man... for all the things he was able to accomplish during his lifetime.

The elevator doors slid open and Tony caressed the weapon one last time before allowing his arm to fall limp at his side, moving forward with his usual unperturbed grace and his chin held high. It was an open floor where many of his men would often loiter around during the night, and tonight didn't seem to be an exception. There were several younger recruits hooting and shouting in celebration as they watched a soccer game on the large TV in the lounge, and then there were just a

few joining the older heads around a poker table, smoking cigars, and drinking beer and whiskey. There was no doubt in his mind that those young guys would definitely be losing money to the old coots.

It was nice to see things back to normal. The new recruits were beginning to fit in with the old. The trust wasn't there like in the past... but it was getting there.

"Boss!" Hogan called out from across the room, grabbing his attention. Tony snapped his head towards him and immediately noticed his jitteriness - nothing too out of the ordinary. Happy was always paranoid about something or another. Much like Rhodey.

Tony smiled and worked his way over to him, greeting the men brave enough to pass by him with a clap on the shoulder and approving nod of his head. By the time he actually reached Happy, the man was practically dancing on his feet.

"Romanoff brought someone back with her, Boss."

"Just like I asked her, Hogan, thank you." He cocked back the hammer of his revolver, the small click that followed echoed through the common floor and a soft hush befell upon the room. Heads turned to follow him as Happy fell in line with his brisk pace.

"Boss, I don't think this is what you meant when you told her-"

"I'm sure," he mused offhandedly, dismissing the guard's thought with a wave of his hand as he glanced around the large room. He needed to talk to the Keener kid about something important before he went into 'talk' with Romanoff's guest. He was about to send Happy to fetch him from the bunks, but then he spotted him at a small lounge in the corner of the room, standing with wide eyes and a straight spine. Tony couldn't help but be mildly impressed with the kid's ability to obey his orders because he swears that's almost the exact spot he instructed the kid to hang around days ago when there was no one of authority to chaperone him. Thankfully, Happy was back, and the kid could follow him around for a while. "Keener! Get over here."

The boy bounded over quickly, falling in line with the two men's larger strides. He didn't open his mouth to question him and he hung his head to stare at his feet nervously. Tony rolled his eyes and reached out to clap a hand on his shoulder. And he didn't miss the violent flinch given when he did.

"Who's this?" Happy questioned incredulously, giving the scrawny boy a disgruntled once over as they walked.

"New recruit," Tony answered bluntly, ignoring Happy's huff of annoyance. He slung his arm around the teen's shoulders and reached over and tapped his shoulder with the muzzle of his gun. The kid's eyes fixated worriedly on the weapon and, specifically, the cocked back hammer. Tony could feel him shiver beneath his hand and he bit down a chuckle. "Don't worry kid, I won't shoot ya. Promise."

Tony paused midstep, gripping his opposite shoulder with his free hand to stop him as well. Happy paused to glance back at them when he noticed their abrupt halt, narrowing his eyes at Tony dangerously when he caught sight of the kid's pale face as his boss tapped the underside of the kid's chin with the barrel of his gun, forcing his gaze up towards him.

"Look at me, kid." He commanded, narrowing his eyes as he looked down at the teenager. Harley did as he was commanded and didn't break his gaze away from the older man's.

Tony had to be serious about this because this was a serious matter, and the kid had to understand just how serious it was. This wasn't a soft conversation, and just because he won't hurt kids didn't mean he won't take the necessary actions so they would understand just who was in charge; especially if the kid was planning to join his side of the fight when he was older. He wouldn't risk being stabbed in the back by anyone anymore.

"Alright... you gave me some really helpful information about your previous Boss?" The boy nodded quickly. Tony hummed in acknowledgment, never lowering the gun. "You claimed they were contracted to go after me for intel, right? They're collaborating with President Ross? About a weapon?"

"Yes' sir." Harley squeaked, shuddering under the narrowed eyes of Anthony Stark.

He really was as terrifying as they claimed.

"I can't risk recruiting someone untrustworthy, Kid. You have one last chance to come clean and tell the truth if you had decided to make up a little fib to get out of trouble. If I find out you were lying... I won't hesitate."

"I wasn't-I wasn't. I promise," Harley insisted vehemently.

"Don't interrupt me," Tony snapped at him without expression, angling the tip of his gun higher to raise the teen's head so he had to strain his gaze to meet his eyes.

"Yessir."

Tony gave him one last once over before lowering the gun back to his side and tipping his head to the side as if studying him one last time.

"C'mon. Romanoff came back with a little something to back up your story." Tony started walking again, tightening his hold around the boy's shoulders, as if he were about to run away, and dragged him along beside him.

"W-what?" Harley's eyes widened, stumbling over his own feet to match the man's large strides.

"Yeah, kid," he grinned down at the boy condescendingly, "nervous?"

The boy's head snapped side to side with fervor and Tony chuckled.

"Don't worry kid. I won't let 'em lay a hand on you if that's what you're worried about." Tony clapped him on the shoulder once more as he released him from his hold and followed Happy's lead across the room, right towards Rhodey's personal office.

"Boss, I don't think this is quite who you were expecting it to be-" Happy began, stopping hesitantly at the large wooden door to glance back at his Boss and new follower.

"Hush Hogan. Door."

The man did as he was told and opened the door for them. Tony nudged Harley into the room first. He really couldn't risk the kid running. He'd been around the base for days, and if he decided to hightail it back to Oscorp with any bits of information he's learned, well... sucks to suck. And, he kinda sorta liked the kid and the snarky personality hiding beneath a blanket of nerves and fear. Tony was confident he'd be able to worm it out of him eventually.

"Rhodes. Romanoff!" He called out cheerfully as he entered the room. Knowing Romanoff was

successful and came back with a prisoner he could actually *beat* for some real intel. Whew boy. That right there peeled off a thick layer of stress. “Where’s my present? I’ve been waiting for days. Give me some good news.”

“Tony,” Rhodey replied tersely, shooting a menacing glare at Romanoff.

“Well, where is he? Where’s my leverage, Romanoff? You got someone good, I hope. High up on the OsCorp food chain?” His wicked grin bloomed across his face again as he focused his attention on the redhead standing stiffly beside Rhodes’ desk.

“Boss, I don’t think-” Happy starts up again, but Tony held up a hand to silence him and watched as Natasha lifted her hand to point towards the back corner of the room.

“Rhodes let you bring him in *here* ? I thought you didn’t like messes Rhodey,” Tony smirked at the man before spinning around to confront whomever Romanoff had brought back with her while simultaneously wondering how he’d missed the third body in the room, flicking the cylinder of his revolver with his thumb once more.

He paused at the sight of a small form cowering on the floor, tucked into the corner of the room, and it took him a moment to fully process. Tony blinked a couple of times just to make sure he wasn’t seeing things and his mouth fell into an angry scowl. He spun on his heel to fix the woman beside Rhodey’s desk with a glare, releasing a menacing growl. He wiggled his gun at her threateningly. “What the hell made you think bringing a kid here was okay, Romanoff? A KID!!”

He threw his hand in the direction of the cowering boy in the corner for emphasis. “Look at him! He’s a baby! Give me one good reason not to send you crawling back to SHIELD so they’ll do my job and shoot you in the skull *right now* .”

The woman remained as stoic as ever. Never so much as blinking as she angled her head to stare pointedly at the teen boy standing behind Happy.

“That’s different,” Tony growled out.

“So is this. It’s Richard Parker’s son.” She retorts bluntly.

Tony cocked his brow, and the anger seeped from his features as he processed. “Hmm,” he hummed thoughtfully, “THE Richard Parker? Osborn’s right-hand? The mad scientist behind this whole mess?”

Natasha nodded, and a small smile broke across Tony’s face as he turned back to look at the tiny kid reduced to terrified sobs in the corner of Rhodey’s office.

“Hmm, I guess that is a good reason. What’s his name? I forget.”

“I-I-It’s Peter, sir,” Harley answered quickly without breaking the gaze he had settled intently on the child. If Tony didn’t know any better... he’d say there was a spark of familiarity in that gaze.

“Peter? Peter Parker. That’s a nice name.” Tony mused under his breath, offering the teen a playful nudge as thanks. He uncocked his gun and tucked it back behind waistband.

“You couldn’t have got that bratty one of Osborn’s?” He joked to Natasha lightheartedly as he approached the tiny child.

“Tony,” Rhodes reprimanded him tightly.

Tony ignored him and continued his advance on Peter Parker. The kid had backed himself further into the corner, curling in on himself, with his arms hugging his bony knees to his chest. He followed Tony's form with wide, terrified eyes, without a single blink. Tony studied him for a short moment before crouching down to his level. Peter cried out in surprise at the quick movement and attempted to scramble away from him, but he was already backed too far into the corner to get any farther. So, he tucked his head close to his knees and turned his cheek to Tony, looking away to squeeze his eyes shut tightly as his whole body shook with violent, terrified sobs.

Tony felt his heart go out to the kid. He knew what he was going through, because, heck, Tony went through it so much as a child too.

"Hey, look at me," he instructed, reaching out to grasp the kid's tiny chin between his thumb and curled forefinger. He tugged at it until the kid was looking at him again, and he smiled. "You don't have to be scared, alright? I'm not gonna let anything happen to you. You're just gonna have to stay with me for a little while, alright?"

Chapter 5

“Hey, it’s alright,” Tony coaxed gently, softening his grip on the quivering child’s chin when he realized how threatening the hold must have felt to him when it was coming from a large man looming over him. “I’m not going to hurt you, Peter.”

The boy still didn’t say a word and he clamped his eyes shut tightly. His eyes watered, and tears fell from the corners of his eyes then trailed around his reddened cheeks and trembling lips. He shivered violently, hunched in on himself, emitting a sorrowful whine as his body broke out into harsh sobs. Tony’s brows furrowed and he had no idea what in the world he was supposed to do. He continued trying to coax the boy into calming down, but the effort was futile. The kid was downright terrified.

Then Tony’s expression fell into a hard frown and his eyebrows furrowed together angrily when he caught a glimpse of a purplish bruise peeking out from behind the kid’s collar. He dropped his hand from the kid’s chin and tugged at the piece of clothing roughly, causing the child to yip fearfully at the sudden movements thanks to his momentary neglect of being gentle... *force of habit* .

He nearly tore the fabric in his impatient effort to pull it out of the way and a growl stemmed from deep within his throat, vibrating across his chest as he ran his calloused fingers along the dark bruises trailing across the kid’s neck and collarbone. The child flinched further away from the threatening touch, trying fruitlessly to tug away from his strong hold. When it didn’t work, he released a bout of pitiful wails and bowed his head to hide in his knees. His body wracked with sobs and Tony tore his hands away from the child as he curled into himself in some half-assed attempt to self soothe.

He stood abruptly, spinning on his heel to approach the woman across the room with fire behind his eyes. “What is that on his neck?” He seethed, nostrils flaring dramatically as he came toe to toe with her to loom over her smaller form, he settled his piercing glare on her and didn’t bother to refrain from spitting in her face as he forced the words from his mouth.

She wordlessly held a hand out and pressed the palm of it against his chest to push him away from her.

“Don’t you dare touch me,” he snarled threateningly, grabbing onto her wrist tightly and twisted it roughly before he tossed it violently to the side with enough force to dislocate a weak shoulder. “What did you do to him?”

She didn’t even flinch, and she glared right back at him. “I did *nothing* . I know your rules Stark, and how hissy you get when they aren’t followed properly. I didn’t lay a finger on that child.”

“Then why’s the skin on his neck and chest swelled and purple? Why else would he have a bruise in the shape of a hand rimming all the way around his neck? Could you have acted roughly or carelessly harmed him to make a quick grab? Who else would have the need to hurt him? Don’t insinuate me an idiot for assuming you to be responsible for something like this. I wouldn’t put it past ya.” His voice mellowed into his usual deceptive calm and his eyes darkened threateningly.

Natasha said nothing as she locked eyes with the man, standing her ground and challenging him to accuse her further.

“You answer me when I speak to you!” He roared, his frustration getting the better of him and his

patience thinning. The deafening silence coming from the other occupants of the room that followed his outburst only defined the distinct sounds of a distraught toddler huddling in the corner of the room.

“Tony, I told you we couldn’t trust her,” Rhodey stepped in, his large arms crossed over his own chest as he stared the woman down alongside him.

“I wasn’t the one to hurt the child,” Romanoff forced out bitterly.

“Then who the hell hurt him?”

There was no immediate answer to his question and that didn’t fail to piss him off. He spun on his heel again and glared in the direction of the cowering boy curled up in the corner of Rhodes’ office. He *hated* it when he was reminded of the fact that people were simply incapable of following *simple* orders.

“Um, Boss?” Tony snapped his head over in the direction of the young voice. He had forgotten that Harley was in the room for a moment. “It’s um-um... You know his Dad, like, beats him, right?”

Tony narrowed his eyes at him.

“What?!” Harley shrank back at the outburst. “Richard Parker? That tiny, flimsy little punk?” Harley didn’t answer him and remained stoically silent as he stood shoulder to shoulder with Happy. “How do you know this?”

“Well, like, I had to babysit... a lot.”

Tony raised his eyebrows, staring at him patronizingly as if he expected him to continue.

“After Mr. Parker’s wife got murdered a while ago there wasn’t really anyone to watch him, so he got into tons of trouble when he was by himself. I-I-I accidentally came in one day when he was getting yelled at for breaking a vile or, something like that, and after I saw it happen a couple more times I offered to watch him for Mr. Parker. It didn’t help completely since I only watch him during the day, but y’know, dads are pricks, so there wasn’t really much anyone could do.”

“What exactly did he do to Peter?” Tony asked with his chin raised and his nostrils still flared.

“Oh-uh I can’t be 100 percent sure, ‘cause Peter didn’t really talk all that much to me about it, but he was really scared of him - I know that. He had bruises sometimes, and a couple times he told me he wasn’t allowed to eat anything all day because he had done something bad the night before. It pissed me off, ‘cause Peter’s such a good kid, but there wasn’t much I could do without risking gettin’ shot or something.” Harley shrugged his shoulders innocently.

“Why is there a bruise around his neck?” Tony pressed him, stepping closer and staring him down as if he had all the answers.

“I-I don’t know... maybe he used Peter as a test dummy for his experiments or something when I was busy running an errand. He was always doing these crazy experiments...”

Harley trailed off softly when he saw the dangerous glint in the man’s eyes. Maybe he had said something he shouldn’t have... He heard the growl and he watched in fascination as the man’s face morphed quickly from anger to indifference right in front of him.

“Hm,” Tony hummed in acknowledgment, lifting his head at an angle to look down at Harley. He took a step closer to him and dropped his gaze to narrow his eyes. “So, you know him well then?”

“Well, I mean...” Harley trailed off, shrugging his shoulders, “not a whole lot. I just- I just... I was just there most of the time... I wasn’t even supposed to talk to him except for when I had to tell him not to do something, ‘cause Mr. Parker said that if Peter got attached to me he’d shoot me. I can’t even understand his logic anymore.” Harley rolled his eyes in exasperation, momentarily forgetting that he was speaking to an already very peeved off Tony friggin Stark. A very dangerous man who seemed to get really riled up at the mention of kids getting hurt.

Tony sniffed to mask the anger flaming in the pit of his stomach. He waved a hand in the air, averting his attention away from the teen and spinning on his heel to face his body towards the corner of the room where Peter still sat huddled against the wall. His chest seemed to press in on itself at the thought of what the little boy had been put through. It reminded him far too much of his father; a wicked man whom Tony resented with a growing passion. He hated that those actions were the norm for men in his profession, and like always, Tony had found a way to be indescribably different because he was too stubborn to accept that those fears and pains he felt as a child could be considered okay. His spite and his stubbornness to prove to his father and grandfather that he could be better than them drove him every day, and even at an early age, he vowed to be a better man and a better father than those two could ever be.

“Sir, I don’t think-” Happy began, but Tony cut him off with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Hush Happy. Please escort Ms. Romanoff and Mr. Keener out of the office if you will. Mr. Keener is now under your 24/7 care and I expect you to tend to each of his needs which includes finding him a room and helping him settle in.” He glances over his shoulder to toss a glance at his bodyguard. “Do nothing beyond basic caretaking without my explicit permission.”

Happy grasped Harley’s upper arm in a tight grip, ready to pull him from the room as his Boss instructed, but Harley scowled at the offending hand and tugged his arm out of the older man’s grasp. Tony repressed a small smirk as the three of them exit the room with a respectful nod of their head towards him, Harley only imitating the gesture after watching the other two.

“Welp,” Tony smiled, biting down on his frustration and shooting a grin in Rhodes’ direction in an attempt to lift his own spirits, “time to test out those new daddy skills Pepper’s been hounding me ‘bout?”

The dark-skinned man rolled his eyes at him and rounded his desk to fall into his chair and get some work done. “Knock yourself out, man.”

Tony shakes his head in abject amusement and slowly approaches the other corner of the room with a bit of hesitance. He wasn’t overly fond of the fact that he had caused the child to burst into hysterics last time and he wasn’t exactly looking forward to the potential of it happening again. It made his skin crawl.

He glances briefly at the large bookcase implanted in the side of one of the walls and his eyes glaze over the large, dusty books aligned neatly on the shelves to ease his thoughts before he jumps right into this whole... mess. Then, he glanced down at his feet and found himself nearly toe to toe with the small, quivering child.

He sighed to himself and stepped to the side. He lowered himself to the floor, pressing his back up against the wall.

“So, how old are ya, kiddo?” He asked softly, cocking his head to the side curiously. He summoned his inner goofball and threw his legs out in front of him so they were sprawled out sporadically across the wooden floor in a nonthreatening manner. Peter peeked up from his knees to glance at him with what looked to be a question in his eyes. His tiny brown eyes widened

comically as he watched Tony's every small movement, shining brightly with tears illuminated by the soft mellow light permeating in the room. His chubby cheeks were scratched, dirty and red, and his dry lips wobbled pitifully.

Tony waited patiently, resting his open hand on his knee, palm up. He read somewhere that showing your palm is a subconscious way of expressing openness and trust... which, to him, sounded like a bunch of bull... but what did he have to lose? Peter eyed the hand nervously, jaw twitching in discomfort as he pulled his knees closer to his chest. It seemed that he couldn't decide between being okay with the situation and... well... not being okay.

"It's alright Buddy," Tony smiled fondly, wriggling his fingers playfully to encourage movement. The move typically worked on cats, and, yes, he knew the kid wasn't a cat, but... it was worth a shot. He knew so very little about children and took every opportunity to steer clear of them. He was always kind to them, but he was still wary. He supposed this was good practice though, considering his own baby girl was due in about 3 months.

Peter's gaze shot away from his hand and moved back up at Tony's face when the man began to speak. He slowly raised a shaky hand up to hold out four fingers in answer to his question. He didn't utter a word until Tony said nothing and urged him to speak with an expectant nod of his head.

"I'm this many," he whispered shyly before lowering his hand and wrapping it around his knees once more. His chin started to quiver harshly once more.

"Really?" Tony mused with a faux lining of disbelief in his tone. "That's crazy. My kiddo is only this many." He held up the hand on his knee to curl it into a fist.

At that, Peter's eyebrows furrowed in confusion and his head cocked to the side cutely. For a moment the fear was whisked away and replaced with a bemused quirk of his brow and his eyes lit up with childish disdain. It was quite cute.

Tony grinned at the display. "She's zero years old... she hasn't even been born yet."

"Ohhh," Peter mused quietly with just a tiny hint of a smile pushing through. He lowered his head again to rest his chin on his knees, but he didn't shy away any further from the man, which Tony took as a success. "I'm a lot older than her." He continued after another couple moments of silence.

"Yes, you are," Tony affirmed with a nod of his head, slowly lowering his hand back to its original position on his knee to avoid spooking the kid.

It was refreshing to associate with a miniature person that didn't seem to harbor hate or evil intents. There was always the possibility of there being an underlying motive, but his job was to read people and determine if he could give them his trust... and oddly enough, he trusted Peter. He had respect for him, and he could see his kind heart because despite all the trouble he's been through... he's still good. He didn't resent the world like Tony did at his age. He didn't kick and scream and threaten with violence. He didn't spit or scowl. He was just a scared, innocent little boy, and he didn't know what was going on. It amazed Tony that such a pure heart could be conceived by such an evil man.

"Ho-how many years are 'ou?" Peter questioned meekly with a tiny, little-boy voice, tucking in closer to his knees as if he were afraid of asking the question.

"Wow," Tony sighed dramatically, puffing out his cheeks with air, "*lots* of years kiddo. *Soo* many."

A small giggle escaped from the kid and Tony's head snapped over to catch him in the act. Immediately, though, Peter flinched away, covering his mouth hurriedly with fear pooling back into his eyes and tears beginning to leak as his body slowly shook with repressed sobs.

"No. Laugh," Tony instructed desperately, "it's okay to laugh. Laughing is good."

"Oh," Peter mused, "my Daddy say no laugh 'oo much. It's noi-noisy."

Tony bristled slightly at the confession. He could vaguely remember the same instruction being directed towards him as a child. He'd laugh right in his father's face as a response, because he was a brat with no self-preservation skills, and his father didn't hesitate to pull out his belt and whip him till he was sobbing and begging for him to stop. All because he laughed... and it wasn't until he was older, and he'd met Pepper that he learned it was okay. That strong men could laugh and still be strong.

"Well," Tony smiled sweetly at him, "your dad's wrong, alright? You laugh as much as you want to, you hear me? Laughing is good for you." It came out as more of a command than anything else, and he silently cursed himself for it. That was something Pepper had been nagging him about, and he'd have to get a handle on it soon.

"Y-y-yes sir," Peter cowered, nodding his head fervently.

Tony sighed inwardly. He risked a glance up towards his friend across the room to find the man busy at work, completely oblivious to his Boss' attempts to win over the sulking child.

"How about this Buddy..." Tony paused, cocking his head to the side to glance down at the doe-eyed child. "You show me a nice big smile, and I'll take you on a tour of my Tower."

Peter's head snapped up to look at the man, and sure enough, a big, ear-splitting grin grew across his face. "Like-like ac'ual S'ark 'ower?"

"That's the one," Tony smiled, "I take it, you've heard a bit about it?"

Peter's head nodded enthusiastically, releasing his tight hold on his legs. "Yes, p'ease."

Chapter 6

“New York City’s vigilante-esque crime organization, Shield, has been overridden by the Nazi terrorists best known as Hydra, and several Shield soldiers have been found dead, littering the streets of Brooklyn New York with a graphic message carved into their skin. Captain Steve Rogers of the NYPD has warned the citizens of the city to stay indoors and out of trouble while officials fight to get a handle on the rapidly spreading infestation of the Nazi organization and the pool of dead bodies that follow them. He has disclosed several secrets that had once belonged to Shield and the good they had done for the people despite their unorthodox ways. Now, as these secrets are being uncovered, many are lead to believe that Shield had been acting as what its name has insinuated: a shield to the innocent citizens of the United States, and without their protection many people are fleeing the state of New York out of panic and terror.

With many undercover Hydra agents impersonating law enforcement officers coming to light on their true identity, the people of New York have lost their trust in these officials and our government. President Ross has placed the blame upon Tony Stark and his organization because of the well-known influence his father and grandfather had had on both Shield and Hydra. He has signed an executive order for Tony Stark to be executed for his many crimes despite the people’s protests about their last line of defense against Hydra-”

“This is just depressing JARVIS,” Tony scoffed in amusement, but his stiff demeanor was undeniable, “Next.”

JARVIS does as instructed and the holographic TV hovering a few feet away from his workstation flickered to the next news station.

“-Nick Fury, known leader of the crime organization Shield, has been killed by operatives of Hydra. Reports read that Hydra has been an unknown and unidentified part of Shield since it’s conception when it broke away from the Stark Family, a well-known crime family through America and Europe, after Leonard Stark’s death. The terrorist organization has been hiding in the shadows and has the potential to be lingering behind other doors that we are still unaware of. Many are speculating if Hydra was the reason for Tony Stark’s near downfall by the small Afghan terrorist organization, The Ten Rings, approximately 6 months ago before the betrayal of his father’s right-hand, Obadiah Stane was uncovered. Some believe it was merely a coincidence, but others feel it is correlated to the betrayal of Howard Stark’s long term right hand, and CFO of Stark Industries, Obadiah Stane. Many details point towards Stane being a long-time dedicated member of Hydra, and it only furthers President Ross’ reason for the court order that he has guaranteed will lead to a long awaited execution if everything goes to plan. Anthony Stark has been labeled as a terrorist and a threat to the world. Leads are still bringing to light new information about Stark and the presumed theory of his mob organization that has been circling for generations, and many people are being led to believe that the attempted assassination of Stark was an instruction to Stane from Hydra to eliminate any threat that could potentially stand in the way of their longtime goal of world domination. Ross and several army generals are in disagreement with the circulating theories regarding Stark and his organization. They are insistent that Stark has a strong influence, and even a potential leadership role dwelling within Hydra, and the fact that Stark’s main rival has been murdered, only further encourages them to believe that Anthony Stark has been manipulating the world this entire time,

claiming to be the right to all the wrongs in the world. They believe that the elimination of Tony Stark will be the first step to cleansing us of Hydra once and for all. People around the globe who know of Tony Stark and his ways argue with the irrefutable fact that the man would never allow the terrible offences Hydra commits and he is our best chance at surviving the destruction Hydra will inevitably bring if nothing is done-

“Hm,” Tony hummed noncommittally, toying with his screwdriver as he attempted to loosen a pesky screw from his latest attempt to configure his hypothetical cloaking technology with a shaky hand. “Is there nothing good on today, JARVIS?” He holds up an open palm and quickly clenches his fingers together. JARVIS turns off the holographic screen in response.

“Many people are very worried about the recent infestation of Hydra, Sir. It is expected for most news reports to be circling about the latest attempt for world domination. You, Sir, however, are receiving a large amount of news coverage as well because of your known affiliation or- pardon, *lack* of affiliation with Shield. Major conflict regarding you has broken out and not just among the US government.”

“Hmph,” Tony grunted in response, ignoring JARVIS’ attempt to make ‘light’ conversation, “Hydra should have killed me when they had a chance.”

“So, you believe the speculations that Mr. Stane was a conspirator with Hydra?”

“I don’t know,” Tony admitted with a shrug of his shoulders as he hunkered down lower to get a better look at the pieces he was soldering. “If he wasn’t, this would be a pretty great coincidence. Hydra has the perfect means to want me dead.”

“*Many* people want you dead, Sir.”

Tony couldn’t help the sly grin that split across his face. “Fair point... but if Stane were working with Hydra... the world would be in pretty deep shit.”

“Why’s that sir.” JARVIS questioned.

“Nothing you need to worry yourself about JARVIS. Let me do the worrying around here.”

“I am unable to worry, Sir,” JARVIS answered, “I am here to be a physical and mental aid to you and nothing more. It is good for you to voice and work through your thoughts and opinions-”

“I know JARVIS-”

“Sir,” JARVIS immediately interrupted, his voice morphing with urgency, dropping the empathetic tone he was using for their previous discussion. “Phil Coulson of the fallen Shield is attempting to contact you.”

“Phil Coulson?” Tony frowned; eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Didn’t I kill that dude years ago?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Hold it, save the number and trace the location. I don’t want to get involved with this Shield and Hydra nonsense until I can guarantee that my own men are clean and the news coverage about me has died down.”

“Very well Sir.” JARVIS replies.

There are no more interruptions for another couple hours, and Tony continues toying with the cloaking technology during that time. He had always been well known for his genius, but until as of late, he'd put little effort into anything but weapons and robotic aids. He had always had ideas, especially when he was younger and had a limitless imagination, but he'd never been able to actively work with them. It was different, tiring and exhilarating all at the same time to finally put his creative ideas into work, but the nagging feeling at the back of his skull had resulted in a swirling stomach and a cramped jaw.

Hydra was on the loose again. Shield was down. Nick Fury was dead. And most of his own good soldiers had needed to be killed by his own hand. He was on his back, belly up. He had no plan, no weapons, no upper-hand, and he could feel the dread seeping into his bones as his hands shook uncontrollably above the circuit board.

He had a daughter on the way, a wife, friends, and an entire new recruitment of untrained soldiers that were all depending on him and he had to do something to minimize the threat when Hydra inevitably came knocking down his door. So, he dropped the circuit board and pushed away from the desk, dropping himself in front of another. His eyes burned with fury, and his brows creased together in determination as he picked up the enhanced revolver that had been discarded days ago on the desk and got to work once more.

His job was to protect... and what better way to protect his family than ensuring his men had the best tools and weapons at their disposal.

"Sir," JARVIS begins, interrupting the genius' work with what seemed like an exasperated sigh, "it seems that Mr. Hogan has had enough of his babysitting duties and has requested to get back to work with training the new recruits. I believe you would say he is 'throwing a tantrum'."

Tony chuckled under his breath at the thought, a smidgen of relief clearing a few the dark images of death swirling through his thoughts. The poor man had never been a fan of kids, and, really, the only reason he had stuck the bodyguard with Keener and Parker was to see his face when he did. It wasn't a disappointment by any means. It was beyond priceless and he told JARVIS to save the picture for forever, and at the thought of that... a small smile broke away at his troubled frown.

"Tell 'im to drop them off with Rhodey for a while." He answered through another soft chuckle. He loaded the gun he was working on with a few self-made tracer bullets and pulled back the chamber with a soft click. He cocked his head to the side and lifted the lightweight weapon with one arm to line up with the target several feet into his workshop.

"I believe it may be a bit late for that, sir—" Just as JARVIS finished speaking, the wooden door to his workshop is thrown open without any warning. He sighed and rolled his eyes - he was far too used to the noise to be startled by it - and lowered the gun to point safely at the ground.

"I've had it up to here!" Happy shouted angrily, storming into the room with a wailing child in his arms and a grinning teenager following behind him. Rhodey stood beside him, shaking his head in amused disappointment as he held the door open for the fuming man.

"Nuh-uh. No kids in here." Tony states firmly, clicking on the safety of his gun and tucking it into his waistband before moving forward to shoo the four of them out of his workshop. He ignores the high-pitched wails emitting from the flailing Parker kid in Happy's arm and turns towards Harley, who had apparently grown a pair during the week of his stay, and who had caught sight of the array of weapons across his desk. The kid moved forward with an excited twinkle in his eye as he stared at the display of never before seen weapons. Tony frowned at his exuberance and blocked his path with his own body and with his arm out to push the boy back.

“What’s that?!” Harley exclaimed curiously, trying to catch a peek at the guts of a massive, disassembled gun from over the taller man’s shoulder.

“Nothing you should be messing with.” Tony growled out monotonously, giving the boy one last good shove to set him on a path leading out of the room.

“I won’t mess anything up, I swear it! I made a potato gun myself when I was like 8, so I totally know how to handle a gun. Oscorp taught me all about it, I won’t hurt myself-”

“No minor is going to be handling anything more dangerous than a knife around here. Understand?” Tony instructed pointedly with an irritated glare flitting behind his stern gaze as he jabbed a finger into the boy’s chest.

For a moment, Tony sees a small flicker of fear pass across the kid’s face when he undoubtedly came to realize he had angered the man in some way, and the kid immediately backs off, hands twitching nervously. Tony growls frustratedly under his breath, gritting his teeth together at the horrific sound of babyish screams, and takes another step forward to finish ushering everyone out of the room completely. He closes the door firmly behind him, ignoring the fear-induced distraught on the teen’s face and instead turning to his two best friends.

“Why’d you bring the kids into my shop?”

“How were we supposed to know, Tony?” Rhodey questions with a roll of his eyes. “This is the first time we’ve ever had kids in the Tower. There’s never been a rule about kids in your workshop.”

“If it would be Morgan would you bring her into the most hazardous area of this entire Tower?” Tony snaps patronizingly.

Rhodey scoffed. “That’s different Tones. Morgan’s gonna be *your* kid-”

“How’s that any different?” Tony insisted vehemently, eyes narrowing into a defensive glare.

Rhodey’s mouth opened and closed in confusion for a couple moments before Tony spoke up again.

“Well now you know,” Tony replied snappishly before turning to look at the troubled toddler in Hogan’s arms. “What’s wrong with the Parker kid?”

“He just started screaming about going home to his mother...” Happy answered blandly, moving forward with his arms outstretched in an attempt to push the kid off on Tony, but Tony was quicker than him. He took two large steps backwards and lifted his hands to busy them by brushing at his shirt.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that,” Tony replied with an innocent shrug of his shoulders.

“And why not?” Rhodey questioned a bit indignantly as he turned his body to face his Boss.

“We’d lose leverage that way,” Tony shrugged. “His father still hasn’t responded to our demands and his mother is dead.”

Both Rhodey and Happy frowned at him, but he kept a straight face. The kid only seemed to scream louder at that.

“Aren’t *you* the one all against holding kids captive for our own gain?” Rhodey pointed out, a

small scowl creeping down from the corners of his mouth.

“Yeah, only when their father’s aren’t complete asshats.” Tony sniffed, cocking his head to the side a bit condescendingly. Before Rhodey or Happy could retort, he turned to look at Harley with his chin lifted in just a way so he was looking down at the kid domineeringly. “How comfortable is Peter with you?”

“Uhhhh,” Harley trails off, lowering his voice and his head to stare at his feet, “I don’t know. He doesn’t really seem all that-”

“You look at me when you speak to me,” Tony interrupted, chucking a finger beneath the kid’s chin to raise his head.

“Um-um... I-I think he likes me alright. He doesn’t seem to be very responsive to me right now though,” he answered, making sure to keep his eyes locked with the older man’s.

“Hmm, bummer,” Tony mused turning once more to look at Happy struggle to hold onto the thrashing child. “Put the kid down Hap. He’s gonna end up giving himself a hernia with the way he’s squirming around.”

Happy did as he was told and lowered the squirming kid to the ground. That seemed to be a mistake, though, because as soon as Peter’s feet hit the floor, he released a loud warrior-like banshee scream and ran straight at Tony with his brows furrowed in untamed anger.

“I want my MAMA!!” He screamed, throwing his tiny fists at Tony’s thigh and kicking at his shin a few good times before spinning on his heels with a slight stumble to try and escape down the empty hall.

It was a very sad attempt at an attack.

“Yeah... no,” Tony sighed tiredly, reaching out to scoop the kid off the floor before he could book it down the hall. The boy struggled against Tony’s strong arm wrapped around his waist as he hoists the kid up against his hip as if he were holding a basketball. His little legs kicked wildly, and his face was beat red from the strain of his angry screaming. “Let’s not do that kid.” He reached out to clamp his other hand over the boy’s mouth to muffle the god-awful screams. The kid bit at his hand and he could feel the vibrations of angry growls against his palm, but he held it there despite it.

“Tony,” Rhodey placated, eyeing the squirming boy, “I don’t think we should keep him here.”

“Then what should we do? Send him back boo-hoo crying to his abusive father so he can get beat some more for being a pitiful little crying wimp? Back to Osborn right before we’re gonna burn him and his sorry men to the ground? Is that what we should do Rhodey?” Tony feels a bit of anger flare up in his stomach and he unconsciously tightens his hold on the kid as if he were afraid Rhodey would try and take him away. There was too much running through his head to get a proper handle on his emotions like he usually did, and this overabundance of anger seemed to be following him around constantly lately and he couldn’t seem to get rid of it.

“We don’t know if he was abusive Tony,” Rhodey sighed. “We only have speculation based off what Keener thinks he knows.”

“But what if he is abusive?” Tony fires back furiously. “Why else were there bruises circling his neck when we found him, Rhodes?”

“Tony, listen,” Rhodey sighed softly, lowering his voice in an attempt to calm the man from his

anger, "I know that this is a sensitive topic for you... but doing this would be breaking your own rules man. You can't just tear a child away from his family."

"He doesn't have a family there anymore," He growled out through a gasped breath. Tony could feel his throat tighten and he quickly clamps his teeth together tightly - so much so that it hurts - to avoid spiraling into a deep pit of panic. He was a grown man for god's sake. He shouldn't be affected by the abuse he suffered as a *child*. Especially since he's a Stark... because Stark men are made of iron and that pain he endured was only to build him up... to make him stronger. It wasn't something to be afraid of; it wasn't. He was a grown man, a criminal, a murderer, a person who shouldn't be affected by minor events of his childhood.

"Boss?" Harley questions tentatively, stepping forward and lifting his hand to reach out for the man, but thinking better of it moments later and dropping the limb. "Are-are -"

"Just!" Tony snapped through clenched teeth, holding up the hand covering Peter's mouth to silence the other boy. "Just hush." He moves to rub at his forehead and Peter continues his angry wriggling and pitiful cries for release. (*"Lemme go! Lemme go!"*)

"Alright, here's what's gonna happen. Happy... you're going to take Harley down to the 12th floor and start on his training-"

"Tony, we don't work with child soldiers!" Rhodey barked defiantly.

"Shut up!" Tony shouted angrily. The whole room quieted, and even Peter stopped squirming, lapsing back into soft whimpers and sobs as the tension in the room grew.

"I give the orders here Rhodes," he responds menacingly, "so shut up and *listen* for once in your goddamn life." He couldn't help but notice how Harley shrunk even further away from him to stand closer Happy. "Harley needs to learn some self-defense, because I'm not gonna let him out of this Tower alone until I know for a fact that he is capable of defending himself, understand?"

He could see Rhodey visibly gritting his teeth. "And I'll be taking Peter off your hands. Pepper will know what to do with him."

With those last words, he waves the other three off and spins on his heel to head for the elevator with Peter draped over his arm like a limp rag doll. "And have Allen send out another message to Richard. I'm getting sick of waiting."

He gets no response because he's already in the elevator and the doors were already closing. He breathes out a strangled breath, releasing his pent-up anger and the mountain of tension that had built up on his shoulders. He could feel the weight lift off his chest and he could finally stop shaking.

The quiet calms him, and after a few moments he opens his eyes again and directs his attention to the crying child pressed against his hip. His breaths come out a bit more ragged, and he could feel his eyes begin to sting at the overwhelming intensity of all that was going on. His throat clenches as he recounts the last few moments.

"Hey buddy," he supplied softly, speaking through a gravelly voice and thick, sticky saliva. He gently moved the kid away from his hip and lifted him, so he was properly cradled against his chest. Slinging one arm beneath his legs to support him and using the other hand to brace against his back. He inches the hand up to the back of his neck and directs the kid's head to lie in the crook between his shoulder and neck, so the soft cries are muffled by his skin. He shushes the kid quietly while he lifts his hand further to pet his hair soothingly. He just hoped that Pepper would be able to

help.

“It’s okay,” he whispers quietly with his thick, staticky voice. He squeezed his eyes shut because he didn’t know if he meant it for the kid or for himself.

“I wan’ my Ma-mama,” the boy choked out between sobs and Tony’s chest constricted around his heart once more and he couldn’t freaking breathe.

“I know Bubba,” he choked, “... I know, but she isn’t here right now.”

“I wan’ ‘er!” Peter wailed.

“I know.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

His mind just wouldn't stop screaming

Chapter Notes

Be warned, out of all of them, this is a pretty trigger-y chapter...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The ride in the elevator was long and tortuous. Or, at least, that's what it felt like while he was struggling to keep a hold of a distressed toddler in his arms. Peter continued sobbing and wailing, and Tony could feel the tears and snot soaking through his workshop T-shirt. It was beyond uncomfortable, sure, but he felt that it was a good learning experience. He needed to be ready for whatever was thrown at him when his daughter was born; quite literally. Whether it be barf, snot, poop, or some other figurative melodramatic drama he's heard was oh so popular with girls. He's heard that having a baby is just a little messy sometimes.

He had to keep telling himself that. He chanted it over and over in his head whenever he would have a fleeting thought about dropping the boy to his own tiny feet to deal with grief on his own (*Practice, Practice, Practice*). Or to take Rhodey's and Happy's advice to send him back to Oscorp, where he would continue to be subject to Richard Parker's sorry excuse for parenting (*Practice, Practice, Practice*). He needed to pretend it was Morgan, because he would never dare to write off her distress like his father had done to him.

It was definitely a learning experience, because he'd never actually been around a child for longer than approximately 5 minutes. He tried his best to steer clear of them most of the time... so maybe Pepper had a point about that whole 'you need practice' thing.

So, yeah... *good practice*.

Pepper would probably think so as well. She has been worrying constantly about whether or not she could be a good mother, despite Tony's frequent assurances that she would be the best to ever live... *he* was the one they have to worry about.

He shook his head and huffed in irritation, patting the back of the wailing boy in his arms as he stared at the elevator doors, willing them to open. He knew Pepper would enjoy the company, and she was already an amazing mother despite Morgan not even being born yet... she'd be a much better caregiver than Happy had been over the past few days. It would make the transition easier on Peter, especially considering the boy was crying out for the mother that had died a year prior. Maybe she'd know how to make him stop screaming too...

When Peter released another pitiful wail, he grimaced and bounced the boy in his arms, hushing him all the while. He had no idea what to *do*. The screams were getting louder and more insistent and Tony couldn't help but wish that he was secretly a child-whisperer. He stared up at the floor

numbers longingly, willing the elevator to climb the last 20 floors as quickly as possible, because as soon as he reached Pepper, the sooner he could be relieved of his babysitting duties and the quicker she'd be able to calm the child down.

"It's okay Buddy," He whispered desperately.

"No, it's not!" Peter argued with another anguished wail which was thankfully muffled by Tony's shoulder when the child head-butted his collarbone.

The kid was definitely one for dramatics, that was for sure.

"You killt my Mama! You killt 'er! You took 'er 'way from me fo'ever! Giver 'er back to me you 'ick."

Tony wasn't all too sure what he was supposed to say to that. He didn't know where in the world the outburst came from, what had triggered it, or if Peter even understood what he was accusing him of. He had absolutely no recollection of killing Mary Parker. Though he'd gladly shoot Richard Parker in the face for the things he's done for people over the years... what he's done to Peter, but he would never consider killing the man's wife unless he was given proof of her treachery.

It puzzled him to think that Peter was bringing it up now... The boy had had plenty of opportunity over the course of the last week to release his anger and accuse him of killing his mother, but he hadn't. They had gotten along fairly well, or at least he thought they did, on the couple of occasions they had actually interacted.

He counted to 10 and released a long breath.

"Now, who in the world told you that, hm?" Tony questioned softly, cocking his head to the side to look down at the boy clinging to his body despite his belief that the man had killed his mother.

"My Dad 'old me was you," Peter sniffed pitifully.

"Well, I can promise you that it wasn't me. I don't kill people unless they're bad and they deserve it. As far as I know, your mother didn't deserve it."

Peter's cries quietened to soft whimpers, and Tony could feel his tiny fists curl into the back of his shirt. "So-so you're gonna kill my Daddy."

Tony stiffened, and froze. Yes, he was... but he couldn't tell Peter that. "Now why would I do that Pete?"

"He's bad," Peter whispered simply, turning his head so he could press his nose into Tony's neck.

Tony grimaced as the kid rubbed his snot-nosed face all over the skin of his neck, but his racing heart quickly won over his disgust. If he had doubts about keeping Peter from his father before, he most definitely didn't anymore.

"Do you trust me?" Tony whispered softly, rubbing Peter's back gently when he finally kicked himself out of his surprised stupor. He could feel Peter's nod, and he had to purse his lips because that only further proved the point rattling around in his head. Peter trusted a stranger's word. A stranger who he had surely been taught was a terrible, evil, ruthless man that had killed his mother, more than his very own father, who he believed to be the exact same.

"Alright then. You let me worry about all that stuff, okay?" He paused and glanced up at the floor

number displayed above the elevator doors. He was happy to see that they were practically there. He needed to distract the kid before he asked any more honest and practical questions, because he wasn't sure if he was supposed to lie to him or tell him the truth. He's pretty sure that telling a four-year-old child that the man holding him planned to torture and maim his last living relative wouldn't go over very well. So, he opted to use a distraction.

"I have someone very special that I'd like you to meet."

He smiled gratefully to himself as the elevator doors opened for him, and he stepped out into his personal penthouse. He saw Pepper sitting at their couch with her back to them, curled up reading a book. Peter looked up from his shoulder briefly to catch a glimpse of the woman, before hiding shyly back into his neck.

"Honey," Tony called softly, "I have someone I'd like you to meet."

Pepper turned around at his voice, wearing a carefree smile. Then she saw the boy cradled in his arms and her smile dropped quickly into a worried frown. Tony hurried to the couch, eager to quiet the boy's crying, tugging Peter away from his body to drop him beside the woman, practically right in her lap. He took the seat on his other side; officially smushing the boy between their two bodies.

"Tony," she whispered under his breath as she glanced down at the cowering boy with fresh tears spilling down his round cheeks. She reached out to cup his cheek gently and swiped her thumb beneath his eye to brush away one of his little tears. His little lip wobbled as he stared up at her through watery eyes, and Tony could only look on proudly because he was most definitely right. Pepper knew exactly what to do.

"What's your name, baby?" She whispered softly, brushing his soft curls away from his eyes with her other hand.

"P-P-Pe'er," he answered shyly, subtly leaning into her soft touch. His chin quivered as he nuzzled lovingly into the hand cupping his face.

Tony's heart lurched... the kid was touch starved.

"Oh, Peter," Pepper smiled, "what a beautiful little name. Now, tell me why you're crying baby?"

Peter's little lip only wobbled harder, and more tears spilled from his eyes. Tony's eyebrows etched closer together in worry.

"C-Cuz-cuz... my-my Daddy killt my Mama and said *he-he* did it," he pointed at Tony shakily, "but he say he didn't... and now Mr. 'appy 'nd Rhodey wants me to go back to him and he gonna be so mad!" His eyes clamped shut and he released a pitiful wail when he finished, clapping his hands over his mouth as he sobbed.

"Oh, my baby," Pepper cooed softly, reaching out to scoop the boy into her arms, cradling him gently against her chest as she subtly rocked her body back and forth to soothe him. She shot Tony a dangerous look as she pressed her cheek against the boy's curls. She wanted to kill Richard too, that much was obvious. But Tony already had plans to beat her to it.

He stared down at the small boy curled around his wife's large baby bump, face pressed into her collarbone as he cried. It made him angry.

It made him really angry; a feeling he's become all too familiar with the past few weeks.

He left Peter with Pepper. She'd do a much better job taking care of Peter than he'd ever be able to do, at least emotionally... he could take care of the boy in other ways. Such as making sure he never had to see his father's disgusting face ever again. To make sure Richard Parker gets what he deserves, and justice is served right. That was his job... even Peter felt that his father deserved to die.

Richard Parker broke the rules, and he'd have to pay for what he did. And the cost was a lot more than an easy death. His sins would have to be paid through suffering and pain, and Tony didn't have any problem with that.

He could feel the familiar rage bubbling up in the pit of his stomach, and he strained his body to fight against it. The panic of Hydra, his execution, Stane, The Ten Rings, Oscorp, and now the frequent reminder of his childhood traumas, were just building off of each other. It was one major source of anxiety and panic after another. No wonder he couldn't seem to control his anger anymore. Soon, a large, unstable tower of anxiety was built inside of him and he couldn't freaking breathe! It was swaying back and forth, threatening to crash and fall on him, and he's afraid that if it happens - if he loses complete control - he wouldn't be able to get back up.

As he was storming down the halls, desperate to get back to his office so he could scream and cry and collapse into a shaky mess of panic, he was intercepted by Harley who had been idly lurking around the hall, as if waiting for him to appear.

"Is-is Peter okay?" He asked quickly, jumping into step with Tony and matching his pace.

"He's fine," Tony answered snappishly. He could feel his heartbeat hammering all the way up in his throat.

"O-oh... are you angry? You seem angry."

"I'm fine," Tony replied after releasing a long breath.

"Oh, okay. You seemed kinda shaken up when you left. Rhodey said that the whole abuse thing was sensitive for you... Is that why you were freaked out?" Tony puffed out another breath and he felt his hand start to shake.

"Geez, kid," he sighed, "why do you ask so many questions?"

"I'm just-I'm just tryin' to help..." There was a brief lull in conversation and Tony could finally feel his arm again. Being around another person forced him to stay calm and remain in control... but then the kid had to open his stupid mouth. "Y'know, it's okay if you were freaked. My Dad did the same thing to me... I'm glad he left when I was little, so I didn't have to deal with it as long as you. You could probably consider seeing someone..."

Tony felt his hand start to shake again. His annoyance flared, feeding off the anger and anxiety he had already been feeling and he grit his teeth together to prevent himself from doing something he'd regret doing. His whole body felt strained from the constant withholding of his emotions and he wanted it to stop... but he *needed* to control his anger.

"Are you upset now? Am I making you upset? I can stop-"

"Could you?" Tony snapped through a gasped breath, curling his fingers into a fist.

"Yeah-yeah, I'm sorry. You sure you're okay?"

Then he felt a tentative hand reach out to grasp onto his left wrist gently. There was a flash of red

and all he could remember were the numerous times his father had grabbed ahold of that wrist, only to snap it moments later... because he didn't need that hand to shoot a gun, design a weapon, or throw a punch. He remembered his healed wrist gripped tightly in his father's hand as the man forced it into position before slamming the car door on his tiny fingers. He remembered that those were the same fingers his captors had snapped one by one when he refused to help them... and he just... he just *snapped*.

It happened in a second. It happened before he could think, before he could stop himself, because it was instinct. Instinct driven by fear, and in that moment all he felt was pure unadulterated fear.

He spun on his heels, wide eyes flaring with an untamed anger and his mouth bent down into a furious scowl. His right hand strained stiffly at the base of the kid's neck, fingers itching to close around him, but he didn't let his fingers so much as brush against the kid's skin because if he did, he knew he wouldn't be able to restrain himself. His insides were screaming, his mind was screaming, his shaking hand shaking just an inch away from the kid's neck was screaming. Everything was screaming! He couldn't breathe because he was one move away from strangling an innocent kid and he couldn't drop his goddamn hand!

"Tony?" The kid choked out softly, staring at the arm outstretched towards his body with shiny eyes and stuttered breaths as he fought back the tears.

Harley was scared! Harley was scared! He was scaring him! Tony was scaring him! He was about to hurt him! Oh god...

He couldn't help but picture the dark bruises that he had found ringed around Peter's neck, no doubt a result of a certain man's uncontrolled anger. He was no better than the man's pleas for mercy he wished to listen to as he ripped him open one slit at a time. He was about to hurt a kid.

He gasped for air, huffing as he drew in breath after breath to fill his screaming lungs. He dropped his hand as if it had been burned and he stepped forward, lifting his other arm to pull the kid flush against him, because he wouldn't be able to hurt him when he was this close, surely.

He felt his entire body shaking with shudders, because he could still hear the screaming and it wouldn't go away. He almost hurt the kid he promised to protect.

"I'm sorry," Tony whispered hoarsely, gripping the kid's shoulder tightly as he propped his chin atop the boy's head pulling him securely against his body. He swears he could feel the kid shaking too. "I'm sorry, Kid. I'm sorry."

"I-It's okay. You're overwhelmed. I get it," Harley spoke, muffled against Tony's shirt as the man tightened his hold.

"There's no excuse," Tony replied, releasing the kid's shoulder to grasp the back of his neck firmly. He ignored the shudders that ran through him at the action, and he pulled away from the kid so he could look the kid in the eyes. He needed to *understand*.

Harley stared at him; jaw clenched together tightly. "Don't ever excuse something like that. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Harley nodded stiffly at him and Tony released him, taking several steps away.

"You know I'd never hurt you on purpose, right?"

"Yessir," Harley said with another nod of his head.

“Okay,” Tony breathed, still searching to catch his breath. “Okay good.” He averted his eyes and angled his body away. “I-I think for now... it’d be best if you weren’t alone with me. Okay?”

“O-okay,” Harley choked out.

“Just for a little while.” Tony assured. Then with that he spun on his heel and dashed quickly towards his office, leaving Harley behind.

He couldn’t believe he was tempted to do something so cruel.

By the time ten minutes had been spent in his office, it was a complete warzone. Papers, cash, and weapons were strewn all over the room. Knives were imbedded into the wall and several scotch glasses had been shattered. It wasn’t a pleasant sight.

When those ten minutes were up, Allen was there, breathing heavily and trying his best to not notice the disarray of the room.

“Sir, I talked to Richard Parker. JARVIS is holding him on the line for you. He wishes to speak about Peter.”

Tony offered the man a smile and waved him off, collapsing into his desk chair as he gripped his shaking wrist. “Thanks Allen. You did good. I’ll have JARVIS set you with a good bonus.” That was all the man needed before he was speeding out of the office.

Tony closed his eyes, counted to 10, picked up the phone and held it to his ear.

“Talk.” He snarled impatiently into the receiver.

“Nice to speak with you too, Stark,” Richard laughed humorously. “I heard you have my little boy. I’d appreciate it if you’d give him back.”

“And why do you think I’d do such a thing like that.” Tony asked with a humorous lilt to his voice.

“What do you want for him?” Richard responded tersely.

“Well, who said I wanted anything from you?”

There was a small pause on the other end as Richard contemplated his insinuation, and Tony could feel his jaw cramping together once again.

“You always want something.” Richard accused venomously. “Just tell me what you want.”

“Tell me why you want him back so badly. Does he know something you don’t want me finding out? Does he have something? There has to be a reason beyond just wanting your child Richard. I know you well enough to know that’s not what you’re really after.”

“Give me back my son, Stark.” Richard threatened with a growl.

“He’s not your son,” Tony spat out angrily. “You don’t treat your son the way you treat him. You won’t be getting him back anytime soon.”

“Oh please!” Richard scoffed, “Is that what this is about?! Do you really think he’d rather be raised by the man that killed his mother instead of his own father? He gets punished because he needs to learn Stark. How I raise my son is none of your concern. Your father knew what he was doing, but you still turned out weak and helpless.”

That hit a nerve. It always hit a nerve, because he was not weak! He wasn't! He was a Stark! His father raised him to be strong, dependable, and respectable, and that's exactly what he is. And as much as he despised his father, he couldn't help but strive to match his cunning personality and abilities.

"It is my business when you break one of my explicit rules, Richard." Tony forced out between gritted teeth.

"You're such a coward," Richard spat in turn with a shaky voice. "Only a coward is as gullible and weak-hearted as you. You have no backbone, Stark. Your inability to do what needs to be done is going to be the fall of your organization! You are a disgrace to your family name! No Stark but you has ever been afraid of hurting a woman or child because they understood the concept of greater good! What needed to be done! Maybe if you weren't so afraid, you'd finally get ahead of the game, and maybe your men wouldn't go behind your back and try to kill you when they realize your true self. But poor ol' Daddy beat ya, didn't he? Well, guess what Stark?! News flash! My Daddy beat me too Stark! He beat me an' look at what I've accomplished!" The man laughed through the receiver, and Tony repressed the growl building in the back of his throat. "I'm carrying on the Parker legacy Stark. My Daddy got beat, I got beat, and so will my son. You're just too blinded by your fear to see the need for it. Peter learns with the way we do things. That's what's best for him. So... just send him back to me. You're obviously not fit to raise him."

"I want Richard Parker. Right here, kneeling and begging for mercy in front of my desk," Tony snarled. He settled Natasha with an intense glare as he leaned back against his office desk with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Just Richard?" Natasha asked with a raised brow. "Not Osborn?"

"I don't have a personal vendetta against Osborn right now," Tony answered monotonously. "I need Osborn standing so he can watch the downfall. But I want Richard... I want him dead, and I want to kill him."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I love you guys so so so so so much!!!! <3333

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Here's some more plot...

“So, you mean to tell me that Stane was dealing behind our backs this whole time?” Rhodey questioned angrily, pacing back and forth in front of the desk after absorbing everything Tony had spent the last hour trying to explain to him.

After Tony had gotten off the phone with Richard... it had set him off. He needed to get some things off his chest, because the pressure kept building and building, and he didn't know how much longer he'd be able to go on until he exploded, or collapsed... either one was a very real possibility at this point. There was just too much on his plate, and there was far too much for one man to be worrying about. He had already lashed out more times than he could count; heck, he nearly strangled Harley in the hallway earlier. And he was sick and tired of Rhodey questioning every single decision he made as if he were a complete and utter blubbing idiot.

“That's what I said, Rhodey. He had been smuggling my weapon designs to Norman and the terrorists working for him. He's been working behind our backs this whole time. He worked directly through Ross and who knows how many other psychos webbed up in this mess. I think there's still a lot more to this than what I know. Natasha obviously knows something, since she killed the guy before I could lay my hands on him. Whether it's because of Shield or because she's so goddamn good at sticking her nose in everyone's business, I don't know.” Tony replied, rubbing at the bridge of his nose then glancing up to watch his second-hand wear a hole in his expensive carpet. He couldn't really blame Rhodey for it, because he'd done about the same thing when he discovered the truth about his father's old right-hand, albeit with much more anger, many more broken glasses, and several knives in the walls. Along with a few self-destructive decisions that nearly lead to a complete mental breakdown and potentially painful, and appealing death. He's quite sure he's still balancing on that thin line leading to a hysteric mental breakdown. “And I'm sure you've seen the news... people are speculating that he had worked with Hydra too.”

Rhodey looked at him seriously. “Do *you* think it's possible he could have been working for Hydra?”

“I think it's a possibility looking at all the other asses he was rubbing his nose in... but I sure hope he wasn't. We'd definitely be screwed if that were the case.”

Rhodey's eyes widened. “How so?”

Tony gave his famous sardonic look. “C'mon Honeybear, *think*... Obie was working with the *government*. The one organization I have no control over unless I take over the whole damn world or something... and that's a lot of damn work! If Ross, the *President* of the free county, turns out to be working with nazis... World domination? That'd be easy for him. He's already got an executive order for my head, and nobody would ever blink an eye at him until it was too late. He has the means to fund Oscorp and whatever crazy death ray they're cooking up these days, and he knows that at this point I'm the only one with the means to expose him and stop them... All in all? Not good Rhodes. It puts us in deep, deep shit.”

Poor Rhodey looked like he was about to cry, and Tony could totally relate.

Heck, both he and Rhodey trained right under the man when they were younger. He was their mentor. Rhodey looked up to him just almost as much as Tony had. To think he had been working for Hydra on the side? The organization Howard Stark had helped to 'defeat' during WWII? Yeah, not the best news.

"What was his reason? What was he trying to do? Does Pepper know?" Rhodey paused in his pacing to settle the Stark with an irritated glare. "And why am I just finding out *now*? It's been months, Tony! I should have known about this sooner!"

"First off," Tony began with an irritated lining to his voice, "Pepper is not to know anything about this. She's stressed enough as it is, and that's exactly why Banner put her on bed rest. If I hear you've slipped a single word of this to her, I won't hesitate to demote you. I'm sure Happy would be ecstatic to have your position." His nose twitched in annoyance, and Rhodey rolled his eyes because they both knew that was a bald-faced lie. Tony wouldn't survive without Rhodey and Pepper as his voice of reason. Stark was good at what he did, there was no doubt about that, but sometimes... he could be unstable, especially when it came to copious amounts of stress like this. He handled stress like he did other emotions. Not well.

"Everyone has been in cahoots behind our backs, and Obie was just trying to save his own tail. They wanted my father dead, and now they want me dead. That's what this is about... I think," Tony growled. "They want us wiped clean off the face of this Earth so they can get on with the dirty work I don't let pass around here so they don't have to worry about me getting in the way. Stane recruited guns under my nose before the Afghanistan kidnapping thing happened... lots of 'em. Assassins, mercenaries, idiots who didn't know any better... So, I weeded out the double agents before they had the opportunity to blow my brains out, and I cut off our deal with the DoD 'cause I don't need them turning around and selling my schematics to terrorists so they can take me out... if they do turn out to be Hydra... God this is all just so messed up." Tony realizes he's starting to ramble in his desperation to formulate some sense of this. He groans and shakes his head, frustrated in his inability to see the *reasoning*. There had to be some viable reason Stane wanted him dead. There had to be a motive and he couldn't fucking see it!

"I'm sorry for not telling you sooner. I guess I just needed to wrap my head around it all first... and I just had to make sure you hadn't gone to the dark side either. For all I knew, Stane had converted you and I was down a trustworthy friend... I just had to be sure before I spilled all my secrets. I need at least some type of advantage, y'know" Tony shrugged his shoulders with a tiny grin to highlight his amusement, and Rhodey just glared back at him in offense. "Don't take it personally Platypus. I didn't know who I could trust. Heck, I looked up to Stane more than I looked up to my own father. Known him since I was a little boy... and I was just... It was just a little off-putting, I guess. My trust issues have never been great for good reason... but that knocked me on my ass. You should have seen how many of *my* men have turned faithful to that bastard as if he were God. They died pledging their loyalty to him. It was disgusting... and I think I was scared to think I might lose another friend in all this."

Rhodey nodded numbly, gritting his teeth together sympathetically and laying a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He gives a small squeeze and they both ruminate in the moment before Rhodey asks the age old question: "What now Tony? What are we supposed to do? This is bigger than both of us..."

"Well, based off what I've been able to put together about Oscorp from Harley they're doing something stupid like always. I can't be sure they're working directly with Hydra yet... I just *really* want them to be so I have a good excuse to hang them from the rafters and watch them swing. I

hate those idiots. I need to talk to Richard Parker though. He's the brains behind it all." Tony stood from his desk and rustled through a large pile of papers strewn across his desk. "According to Romanoff's most recent scope, Oscorp's in the middle of developing a radioactive oxidizing agent, and Richard's the head scientist behind the project. I don't know if this is just another one of his rando eccentric experiments he's doing, or if they're serious about it. It just doesn't sound like a great thing for a sociopath to have on hand. If I can get to him, Banner and I can come up with a way to counteract it for a 'just-in-case' failsafe after beating the truth out of him... In Afghanistan I caught wind of something else they're trying to develop. I only got a general idea of the schematics, but I've got a gut feeling it has something to do with whatever Parker's trying to pull off. There's a reason it's being built out of the country." He found the paper he was looking for and pulled it out. He gestured for Rhodey to follow him across the room, towards the large table with contracts, weapons, and cash scattered across it. He unfolded the faded paper and flattened it against the hardwood of the table. "I sketched out what I could remember. I was only able to get a few glimpses at it. They were pretty careless with what they showed me."

"Woah," Rhodey breathed as his eyes glossed over the complicated equations scrawled alongside the darkened outlines of the large machine. "This... we *are* in deep shit, man."

Tony smirked and chuckled. "Well thank you for reaffirming my optimism Captain Obvious." He pointed to the center of the drawing. "This is the power source. That's what they had needed me for... It's why they didn't kill me off the bat. This thing needs one helluva battery for this shit. Something nuclear or subatomic."

"So, what? They're gonna power it and shoot us with lasers?"

"Well, I don't know..." Tony shrugged, "If they end up using Parker's crap... things may be a bit worse."

Rhodey narrowed his eyes at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Tony closed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm himself. "I've looked at a few of the components of the little plague agent Parker and Osborn are cooking up and-and it's like something out of Star Trek. It's adaptable, and it only latches to specific genetic strands... I-I don't know which ones yet until I can actually get my hands on the stuff. They could totally eradicate over a quarter of society based on one gene pool by killing off the carriers and blaming it on a terrible plague by modifying the disease to attack only recessive genes and weakened immune systems."

"Heck man," Rhodey breathed.

"I know, but-" Tony sighed.

"Alright listen," Rhodey instructed, grabbing him by the shoulder. "This is all still just another crazy theory of yours. We don't know for certain that Ross is actually part of Hydra and we can't say for sure that Parker's 'cancer knockoff' has anything to do with this crazy ass machine. For all we know, Ross is a complete idiot that bit into more than he could chew and Richard and Osborn are just back at doing stupid dangerous stuff that could potentially kill off mankind. Nothing new. You're probably just seeing things that aren't there. For all we know, everyone's just doing their own thing. Remember Tony... these guys don't think like you. Don't give them so much credit when it isn't due. I'd be surprised if Ross was capable of keeping his trap shut about all this Hydra nonsense if he did actually had something to do with it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Tony nodded in agreement. "But-But I think it'd still be good to be prepared just in case. Which means we need to find out how far Ross' loyalty goes... and I need to

get my hands on Richard Parker.”

“How do you propose we do that?”

“Romanoff’s already hunting Parker, and I already have a plan in the making for Ross... We need someone on the inside to plant bugs, listen in, get close to him.”

“Tones, all our men are wanted criminals. I don’t think they’ll invite a convict into the White House.” Rhodey sighed when he saw the knowing smirk spread across his best friend’s face. He knew that smirk far too well.

“I was thinking of offering Steve’s buddy, Lieutenant Barnes, a little promotion.”

Two days later Tony goes down to the gym to check up on Harley and Happy while Rhodey helped Natasha gather a small group of men to run some various important ‘errands’. He’d be joining them as soon as they were ready, which could be hours from now, knowing Rhodey. It had been two days since he had talked with Rhodey and after that... the man finally understood everything Tony’s been doing. He apologized profusely for assuming he was an oblivious, careless prick with no self-preservation skills... which wasn’t completely inaccurate. They spent the next couple days formulating a semi-decent plan and for the first time in months Tony could finally breathe again. He didn’t feel that constant pool of anxiety in his stomach, or that trembling anger pressing uncomfortable against his chest, which meant it was safe to see Harley again.

“Hogan. Keener,” He called out into the gym when he opened the door. He smiled in amusement when he was met with the sight of the two circling each other in the boxing arena without any protective equipment besides a few bandages wrapped around Harley’s knuckles. The kid barely stood to Happy’s shoulder and his scrawny body made the match look so unfair.

His voice broke Harley’s attention and he turned away from Happy just for a moment to snap his wide-eyed gaze to the man by the door. Which gave Happy the opportunity to grab his wrist to twist his boney arm behind his back. He cupped a hand around the back of his neck, grating his finger into a pressure point so the boy had to hunch over uncomfortably at the waist. He whined and cursed in complaint.

“Never take your eye off your opponent,” Happy sighed exasperatedly. “We’ve been over this kid. This was rule number 1.”

“Yeah, but-” Harley grunted as he fought to escape the man’s strong hold, “but- like... the Boss is here.”

“Well, what if Boss is there while you’re fighting off some assholes in the street. Ya gonna let ‘em stab ya in the gut just cuz the Boss is there.” Happy patronized the boy as he continued to struggle

“I wouldn’t have to cuz Tony would just shoot ‘em for me.” Harley retorted, throwing his arms around in an attempt to land a hit on the man holding him down.

Tony chuckled in amusement, nodding his head in agreement because the kid wasn’t wrong. He shed off his suit jacket and draped it over a nearby chair.

“Take it easy on him, Hap. It’s only his second day.”

Happy released him, and Harley stumbled away, scowling at the man as he rubbed at his sore shoulder. Tony side-eyed him studiously as he slowly rolled up the sleeves of his crisp white dress shirt.

“How’s he been doin’ Hap? Any improvement.”

Happy shrugged with a sigh and disappointed shake of his head. “He has no upper body strength. Very klutzy, and two left feet. Not quite the ideal street fighter if you ask me.”

“To be fair,” Harley interjected under his breath with a grumble. “I prefer to use my hands doing something useful, like building a robot... not punching people in the face.”

“Hm,” Tony hummed, eyeing the dejected teen, and ignoring his statement, “well that just means it’s gonna be all that more impressive when he masters it. Alright,” he clapped his hands together, “my turn. Lemme have a jab at him.”

“What?” Harley squeaked. “You-you-you’re gonna fight me.” He felt the guilt crawl up his throat when he saw the apprehensiveness in Harley’s eyes.

“Kinda-sorta,” Tony crowed with a mask of amusement to hide his underlying worry as he stepped beneath the ropes to enter the arena. He needed the kid to trust him again. “I’ll take defensive. I want you to lay me out.”

Harley’s eyes widen even further and Happy laughed out loud as he stepped out of the arena to spectate in one of the comfy chairs as he sipped at his water.

Tony adjusted his sleeves one more time and smoothed a hand over his hair before he turned to face Harley. Sweat poured down the kid’s face and his cheeks were red from the strain of all the exercise.

“Would you like some water before we start?” Tony asked with sincere concern, but Harley shook his head numbly, so Tony gestured for him to start his attack.

Harley gulped and waited a couple moments before hesitantly jumping out at the man to throw a few weak jabs. Tony easily deflected them, grabbed his left arm and spun him around with a light kick to his rear so he flew into the protective net surrounding the perimeter.

“Don’t throw your body,” he instructed sternly, raising his hands in a defensive position, ready for the next attack. “Shoulders and waist. That’s what you use.”

Harley nodded and recovered quickly to return to the fight. He followed Tony’s adjustments and attempted a hook, leaving his side exposed. Tony’s leg lifted swiftly, and it collided into his side with just enough force to make him stumble to the side.

“Watch your positioning. Don’t leave yourself vulnerable.” Tony lowered his hands from their fighting stance and moved towards the kid. His brows were cast down seriously as he reached out to grasp the boy’s wrists roughly. Harley watched, a little bewildered, as the man adjusted his arms with a few quick instructions. He slapped his bicep then gripped his elbow, giving it a rough tug to make sure he understood to keep the positioning.

“Step, jab. I block, I jab. You parry, deflect, grab, twist, and kick.” Tony walks him through the steps slowly as he verbally narrates the movements, guiding his wrists and body through every small maneuver several times. He repeats the instructions each time, talking a little quicker, and moving a little faster.

He takes a large step forward, to make the kid step back while they repeated the movements by memory. At some point along the way, Harley began repeating the instructions under his breath along with the man. Then, all of a sudden, Tony let him go, stepped back and raised his hands again. Harley wasn’t as quick to recover. He blinked for a moment to regain his bearings, staring at

the man as his brain ran through the repetitive movements over and over and over again. His breathing was heavy, and he felt a little pride begin to shine through with a smirk. He fixed his gaze back on Tony and raised his arms just as the man had instructed him.

“Ready. Go.” And they went. Harley moved through the steps without the guiding hands of Tony, while whispering under his breath. The attacks repeated; Tony went in circles. Harley reacted without even thinking, leaving him in a state of shock every time his arm lifted without his telling it to parry a jab. Then he found an opening and landed the kick at Tony’s side to finish their little fighting skit and the man smiled proudly at him.

“Perfect,” he praised, clapping him on the shoulder.

Harley stares at him, stunned, and his mouth drops open in disbelief. He stares down at his own hands in amazement and an excited laugh escapes his mouth. There was no more apprehension.

“Whoah,” he breathes, “that was awesome!”

“You’ll get better, and it’ll get even more awesome,” Tony smiled, bending down to duck under the ropes Happy was holding up for him. He hadn’t even broken a sweat during their mini workout.

“Keep working him Hap,” Tony instructed, “he has potential... Just a little of it.” He tilted his head at Harley teasingly, and shot him a wink as he did. “I’ll be out late tonight. Make sure to check in on Pepper and Peter before 8 and after 10.”

“Where you goin’?” Harley questioned him curiously, jumping to attention when he realized the man was leaving. He leant over the netting to stare at him, the question pooling from his mouth before he even had time to recount what had happened the last time he had questioned the man.

Tony hesitated and eyed him, finding relief to know the nosey kid was back. “I’m meeting up with a friend of mine. There’s a few things I need to clear up with him.”

“Rogers?” Happy questioned offhandedly.

“Yep,” Tony nodded.

“Can I come with ya?” Harley asked shyly, trying to hide his nerves by biting down on the inside of his cheek.

Tony chuckled under his breath. “You’ve got some balls kid.”

“You said he’s a friend,” the boy reasoned, “and I’m really getting sick of being cooped up in here all the time. I won’t do anything stupid; I promise.”

“Yeah, take him,” Happy agreed, “I’m sick of ‘im. It’s your turn to babysit. You’re the one that adopted him”

“Hey!” Harley grumbled in indignance.

Tony pursed his lips and eyed Happy with an annoyed scowl. He didn’t appreciate the jab hiding behind the comment. Then, he turned to look at Harley. He didn’t know if it was a good idea or not. He shouldn’t be putting the kid in any danger if he brought him along, although, if he was anywhere with Tony that automatically screamed danger.

“I don’t know, kid-”

“Please,” Harley practically begged, “you’ll be there. I’ll be fine. You’ll just shoot ‘im if he tries to stab me or something.”

“Alright,” Tony relented, “but you stick with me. Got it?”

Harley grinned in triumph. “Yes sir!”

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This one is mostly Pepper-centric. It goes into a little more detail about her past and all that jazz. Cue Mama bear Pepper!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So, I was able to sneak you some account reports Pep,” Rhodey smiled, piling the papers onto the coffee table. “You know Tony... he’s not into doing the nitty gritty stuff. I’m sure there are plenty of missing payments for you to sift through and mull over.”

Pepper just smiled and rolled her eyes. She braced a hand on her stomach as she leaned forward on the couch to grab a small handful of the papers. “Tony doesn’t know about it, right?”

“Course not,” Rhodey scoffed. “You think I’m an amateur at this? Tones would have an aneurism if he knew I was giving you anything remotely related to work.”

Pepper nodded in agreement.

She had called Rhodey that morning, completely bored, and completely fed up with Tony’s ridiculous rule of ‘no work’. She *liked* work. It was one of the few things that kept her sane, but apparently Tony felt differently. She’d gone nearly an entire month and Bruce still had her waiting around doing nothing all day, every day, in this stupid penthouse. Nobody but the elite of the elite were allowed to visit her either and it pissed her off... she *liked* talking to people. It was part of her job. It was what she *did*. She swears it’s all a matter of Tony’s paranoia, and she was sick and tired of playing by his ridiculous rules. So, being the amazing wife she was, she appealed to Rhodey’s gullible side instead of starting another pointless argument with her husband. Win-win.

“But seriously...” Rhodey trailed off, eyeing her, “don’t get overwhelmed or anything. Bruce was right when he said you need to take it easy till the baby comes.”

“I’ll be fine Jimmy,” Pepper sighed, “it’s not like I’m going out to assassinate Norman Osborn with Natasha or sparring with Happy. This is simple, boring, and completely dull accounting paperwork. It’s less stressful than watching the news.”

Rhodey raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Tones lets you watch the news?” ...and was that panic??

Pepper sighs in exasperation at the mention of her husband’s ridiculous overprotectiveness. “No. JARVIS blocked all the news channels except for those spiffy stations reporting on changes to local store infestations... when this kid is out of me, I swear I’m going to strangle that man.”

“Oh... good. Okay.” Rhodey nodded. Pepper eyed him from the side and narrowed her eyes at him.

“Why? Is something serious going on that I should know about?” Pepper questioned sternly.

Rhodey stayed abnormally silent.

“Rhodey.” She spoke threateningly, fixing him with a harsh glare.

"Gosh," he laughed nervously, swiping his hand across the back of his neck, "you Starks and your death glares. Can't imagine what Morgan's gonna be like, glaring at me when I won't give her more candy at three years old..."

He was skittish. Something was definitely up and Pepper narrowed her eyes at him.

He broke.

"Pepper I can't. Tony's threatened to castrate me like three different times if I even breathe a word of it to you." If he was being honest, Rhodey didn't really feel all that bad keeping it from her, because there was no doubt in his mind that it would just stress her the heck out. She already knew about Peter and Richard Parker, and that was more than enough to give her hormones to worry about.

"Rhodey I swear," she threatened harshly. "I'm in charge too. If I tell you to share important information with me, then you best well do it."

Rhodey swallowed thickly. Pepper *never* pulled the 'rank' card. Tony did... a lot; but Pepper never did.

"I can't if Tony says I can't... and I agree with him on this one Pep. I don't think it'd be a good idea for you to know... 'cause next thing we know you're marching out of here to go fix the problem yourself."

"Fine," she huffed, "If I can't pull it out of you, I'll just manipulate Happy into spilling his secrets. That man is so easy to bribe, it's scary." Pepper smiled sweetly at him, and Rhodey frowned.

"Happy isn't informed on the whole extent of the situation."

Pepper's head snapped over to look at him in surprise and she blinked innocently at Rhodey. Tony told Happy *everything* whether the man himself wanted to know or not. Literally *everything*. Which included but was not limited to cars, food, machines, guns, boxing, football, soccer, and a million and one unusual ways to kill a man. Happy probably knew more about her own husband than she did.

"So, it must be something pretty big if not even Happy knows about it yet. And what about this whole Richard thing? Tony's been obsessed with that lately."

Rhodey grit his teeth in annoyance. "That's not- I didn't."

Pepper laughed, but her gut twisted nervously. She did *not* like being left in the dark. "It's okay Rhodey. If you agree with Tony, it's probably a good idea that I don't know. We don't want to risk me having another miscarriage... not when Tony's already so attached... I'll just come in and fix the problem when I push this little angel out of me." She smiled as she rubbed a hand down her stomach.

"Lady Stark," JARVIS interrupted politely, "Mr. Hogan is calling you."

Pepper gestured in the vague direction of the corner table at the end of the couch where her phone was, and Rhodey wordlessly reached over to grab the phone for her.

"I'll be going Pepper. I have to meet up with Tones and Romanoff." Pepper waves at him and accepts Happy's call.

"Hi Happy," she answered politely, sifting through the accounts papers Rhodes had dropped by for

her.

“Pepper,” he answered monotonously, accompanied by an excited giggle that most definitely did not belong to him. “The kid wants to come and see you... he won’t shut up and I have work to do.”

Pepper smiled brightly. “Aww, bring him up then Happy. I’d love to see him.”

She grinned as she reminisced on the fun she had had with Peter two days ago after Tony had left on his little rampage. After Peter had finished crying and took a short nap, they read books and watched Disney movies. The kid was a definite snuggler and he loved kisses even more than Tony did.

While they had sat, cuddled on the couch during the movies he’d wiggle around so he could stand on his knees, tilting his head towards her expectantly with his little chin tucked out and his big eyes looking up at her beneath his eyelashes, urging her to give him a kiss on the forehead. Then, after she smiled and pressed her lips to his head he’d grin, drop like a limp noodle, and drape himself across her stomach before repeating the process 15 minutes later. She loved the bright smile that would flash across his face every time she’d give him a kiss. He was very affectionate and seemed to have a bit of a separation issue, and that’s how she had found herself toting around a four-year-old toddler on her hip as she moved about her home. It was hard... and Tony would have a heart attack at the notion of her lugging around anything heavier than a coffee pot. She still adored him though. He was the sweetest child she had ever met, and it made her even more excited to be a mother.

It made her angry when she thought back on all that she had been told about Richard Parker and how Peter had been treated. Even despite all the abuse and lack of attention, Peter was still sweet, loving, and adored any affection that was offered. It made her want to hunt down Richard Parker herself so she could tear him limb from limb, but she knew Tony needed to do it himself. That was what he did. Pepper would provide Peter with comfort, and Tony would provide him with closure.

She heard the elevator ding, announcing their arrival, and an excited shout quickly followed it.

“PepPep!” Peter shouted, barreling towards her with his arms outstretched, ready for a hug.

“Peter!” Pepper smiled, holding out her own arms to catch him.

Peter hugged her tightly, smushing his face into her collarbone before pulling away hurriedly so he could clamber onto the couch beside her. He struggled just a bit, but he smiled widely the entire time and he settled beside her, reaching forward to place his hands gently on her stomach. He leaned forward and rested his cheek right above her belly button, wrapping his arms around the bump and pressing a tiny kiss to it against her shirt.

“Hi Morgi.” He greeted happily. Then he pulled away and reached his arms out for Pepper again. Pepper gladly scooped him into her arms, cradling him like a baby against her chest.

“Hi Baby,” she cooed, “I’ve missed you so much.” And she promptly pressed a loving kiss to his forehead. Peter giggled and raised his arms to wrap them around her neck to reciprocate.

“You’re so sweet,” Pepper praised, smiling down at him as she rocked him in her arms. Peter ate up all the affection, because he surely didn’t receive any of it from Happy. The extent of Happy’s tolerance ended at picking him up, and Pepper didn’t really expect any more from the man.

“No wonder he likes you so much. You baby him,” Happy chuckled, approaching the pair on the couch. He took a seat in the armchair adjacent to them and smiled at her.

"It's nice to be babied sometimes, isn't it Peter?" Pepper smiled, turning to look down at the small boy.

Peter nodded against her, his eyes slipping shut as he snuggled against her chest.

"So, I guess I'll just leave him here with you then. I've got some work I need to take care of." Happy made a move to get up, but Pepper held out a hand to stop him.

She was a poor, bored pregnant woman stuck on bed rest, which meant she couldn't get up, leave, and interact with other human beings besides the ones that would come up and visit her occasionally. Happy was one of those people... of course, she was also bored and dying for any tiny lick of information, but Happy didn't need to know that.

"What work do you have to get done?" Happy settled back against the chair and started on a tangent. He complained about all the incompetent recruits Tony was making him train up.

"I swear to you Pepper; half these guys would be killed in a knife fight. They know nothing. They barely know how to shoot a gun. All of 'em are a million times worse than what Allen had been when Tony first dragged him in."

Pepper just hummed and nodded along, continuing her rocking for Peter.

"Then, there's that Keener kid. Gosh, that kid can't fight to save his life. I caught him disassembling the toaster this morning actually... he's such a handful. Just like Tony."

"Harley!" Peter mumbled, followed by happy snuffles.

That one caught Pepper's attention. "Tony's making you teach the kid to fight?"

"Yeah. For self-defense. He said he didn't want the kid leaving the Tower unless he knew how to protect himself... He set some boundaries for the lessons of course." Happy amended. He didn't want to risk getting his boss in trouble with the missus. "He gets his own private lessons, separate from the other guys."

"Y'know," Pepper mused, "I still haven't met Harley. Why don't you bring him up and then you can go get your work done?"

"Uhh, sure."

"Where is he right now? I know he's not with Tony or Rhodey and I know he's supposed to be chaperoned."

Happy glanced at her sheepishly. "He's waiting for me downstairs in the lounge. Don't worry, I told him to stay put, and I told Allen to keep an eye on him."

Pepper rolled her eyes exasperatedly at him. "JARVIS, tell Harley to get in the elevator, and bring him up here."

She felt Peter stir a little bit and tuck his head further into her arm. She smiled down at him and reached up the arm not cradling his head to comb through his soft curls. Happy watched them.

"Y'know," Happy mused in a whisper, "he hasn't asked for his Mom once since he came to see you. Now he just asks for you."

"Mr. Keener," JARVIS spoke from the ceiling, startling everyone in the room, because JARVIS

never spoke to anyone other than the Boss and the higher-ups... and Allen on special occasions; definitely not to a scrawny little kid recently picked up from Oscorp. "Lady Stark would like you to come up to the penthouse. Mr. Hogan has given you permission as well."

Harley's eyes widened. "Uhh. As in Pepper Stark?!" The fear that danced around his eyes after his outburst was obvious.

The older recruits around him chuckled under their breath, nudging each other, and whispering like little schoolgirls. Allen was the one that finally nudged him in the side, urging him to stand from the sofa they were all lounging on.

"What?" Allen teased with a grin, "you scared of her?"

"Well duh!" Harley practically shouted. "I've heard horror stories about her! She like- she like... she's as bad as the Boss!"

"Well, yeah," Allen mused softly, "that woman can be quite vicious. Just don't do anything stupid and you'll be fine. Now run along Sprout," he laughed, waving him towards the elevator across the room. "You don't wanna keep the Queen of the world waiting."

Harley rolled his eyes in annoyance and stormed towards the elevator. "Don't call me that!"

"Stop messing around with potatoes and I'll stop calling you that!" The young man retorted. Harley just walked faster.

He could still hear the other young men around the lounge howling with laughter... it really wasn't that funny... Pepper Stark may not have been a cold-blooded killer like her husband, but she was a force to be reckoned with, and he's heard the stories... she always got what she wanted, no matter what it was.

Rumor had it that before she had met Stark, she was a professional grifter. She stole money from every rich man across the planet... They had all fallen in love with a mysterious, tall, beautiful woman before promptly going bankrupt. Harley remembered his mother telling the story to him before he went to bed at night when he was younger, because, really, the life and the meeting of the two Starks was so similar to a twisted, criminal-esque fairytale.

Pepper Potts was the best at what she did. And so was Anthony Edward Stark. They were quite the pair.

Of course, quitting after stealing millions of dollars was not an option. The thrill is what had driven her to do what she did, or so his mother had told him in an exaggerated whisper. So, when the dull and stereotypical businessmen came and went with less effort than fishing, she decided that a little more of a challenge would do her good. Her searching brought her to New York, right to Tony Stark because he was exactly what she was looking for... and yadda yadda yadda, the rest was history. They fell in love, got married and now apparently expecting a baby. Harley was saying 'eww' as a child before his mother ever had the chance to elaborate on the cheesy love story that had blossomed between the two notorious criminals... he wasn't as invested in the romance portion of the story as he was the amazing tales of Pepper Potts and Tony Stark and the way people swear they will change the world.

They were quite the pair...

Harley rode the entire ride to the penthouse in silence, quietly recapping the entire life history of Pepper Potts in his head, or at least the exaggerated tales his mother had fed to him as a child to

bribe him into a night of sleep.

Then... - oh god - then the doors were opening, and he felt his stomach jump into his throat. He didn't know why he was more anxious to meet Pepper Stark than he had been to meet Tony Stark himself, but... - wow - she really was gorgeous.

Happy was there sitting in an armchair adjacent to the couch. He slowly entered the room, staring at her with his mouth hanging open, which, yes, he *did* know that was impolite.

"Harley," she greeted warmly with a smile. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

Harley gave a halfhearted wave, his mouth turning down into an awkward grimace because he wasn't too sure what to do with his face. Then he saw Peter cradled in her arms, looking like a tiny baby as Pepper rocked him slowly back and forth. He swore he heard little snores and he felt his nerves fall away. He felt warm and happy to know Peter was finally getting the love and attention he deserved. Yet a tiny seedling of envy sprouted in his stomach and at that moment he wished he was a small baby too so he might be able to get a hug like that.

"Why don't you come sit?" Pepper invited, patting the spot next to her.

Harley didn't make a move to sit. Instead, he glanced at it suspiciously and turned to look at Happy for instruction even though technically Pepper was the boss in this situation.

The man simply nodded in the direction of Pepper and Harley inched forward to drop down on the couch a good few feet away from Pepper and Peter. It was quiet for another couple moments as Pepper simply looked at him.

"Why don't you go get your work done Happy? I'll keep the boys company while you're busy."

Harley's eyes widened in panic and his head snapped to the side to look at Happy. *Why did Pepper Stark want Happy to leave? Why was she looking at him like that? Why was she lowkey kicking his chaperone out? Did she want to murder him?*

Happy's brows furrowed contemplatively. "Uhh, I don't know how Boss will feel about that Pepper."

Pepper waves it off with a small huff. "We'll be fine Happy. I just want to get to know the child my husband's been raving about. I'll send him down to you or Allen as soon as I'm done with him, okay?"

Happy relented and slowly stood from the armchair, fixing Harley with a stern look.

"Be good. Don't cause any trouble," he said, pointing an accusatory finger at him. Harley's nose scrunched up teasingly and he grinned just to see what Happy would do... nothing apparently. He just turned around and left. That was it.

"So, Harley," Pepper spoke up in a hushed whisper. Harley whipped his head around to look at her, narrowing his eyes suspiciously at her lowered tone. Pepper just laughed and nodded down to a sleeping Peter in her arms. "It's about his nap time, and I don't want to wake him up."

"He-he has a nap time?" Harley questioned with a raised eyebrow... Happy had never put Peter down for a nap before. Neither had he when they were with Richard.

"Yes, all children need a couple extra hours of sleep during the day, or else they get kinda cranky... I'm assuming Happy doesn't put him down very often."

Harley shakes his head numbly, staring at her blankly, because he just couldn't seem to process what a wonderful person she was. How was it possible for both Tony Stark *and* Pepper Stark to be nice? That's just crazy. "Um-um sometimes he sleeps with Rhodey though while he's doing work in the office."

Pepper raises her brows. "Oh really?"

"Yeah. Happy's always movin' around too much for Pete to sleep I guess. All Rhodey does is sit at his desk and do paper stuff when he watches Peter. So, Peter just goes to sleep on his shoulder," Harley smiles a bit, "Rhodey gets kinda peeved 'bout it sometimes though because he drools. Happy thinks it's so funny so he makes Rhodey keep 'im 'til he wakes up, because if Pete wakes up then he's super cranky... like you said."

Pepper nods. "Is that why he had his little fit two days ago?"

"Yeah, probably." Harley mused. "We were hanging with Rhodey and then Happy and Rhodey started arguing and it woke Peter up... he just started screaming."

"Well, that's what happens," Pepper sighed, turning her attention back towards the tiny boy. She pressed a quick kiss to his forehead and smiled when she saw the corners of his lips curve up into a sleepy smile.

Harley did his best to refrain from saying anything. He didn't want to risk getting on Pepper Stark's bad side, so he just stayed silent until she addressed him again.

"Y'know... Tony talks about you quite a bit." Pepper stated randomly.

"Re-really? He doesn't, like, hate me or anything?"

"Of course not. Why would you think that?" Pepper amended quickly.

"Well, I don't know, I kinda pissed him off the other day." Harley recounted that particular interaction he had with the man... he hadn't really seen him since.

"He's just been a little stressed lately. He has a lot on his plate."

"Yeah," Harley chuckled humorlessly, hanging his head to stare at his lap, "I know. He's got a ton of stuff to deal with."

That spiked Pepper's attention. "So Tony tells you all that's going on? He must trust you quite a bit."

Harley laughed. "What? No. It's not Tony- I mean... Boss, sorry-"

"You can call him Tony, Harley. Just not around any of the other guys, they might get a bit jealous." Pepper teased with a small smirk.

"Why would they be jealous?" Harley playfully rolled his eyes.

"Because you're one of Tony's favorites." Pepper smiled knowingly. "Calling Tony 'Tony' is quite an honor around here, y'know."

"I'm one of Tony's favorites?" Harley gaped.

"He has a soft spot for kids," Pepper answered.

"I knew it! I knew he liked me!" Harley shouted in celebration. Pepper quickly shushed him when Peter started to stir.

"Ooh, sorry," he apologized sheepishly.

"It's okay Honey," Pepper smiled. There was another couple beats of silence before she spoke again, with another question.

"Are you enjoying your stay here so far?"

Harley shrugged, picking at a scab near his thumb that would surely be bleeding profusely by the time this discussion was over. "Yeah, I guess... it kinda sucks not being able to leave, but I get it. It's kinda nice not having to worry about getting jumped or shot or something. There's just not much to do here, especially not when Happy's always watching me like a hawk."

"Aww yes," she smiled, "I heard he interrupted your adventures with the toaster this morning."

Harley blushed and turned away from her so she wouldn't see his heated cheeks.

Pepper smiled. "How about I give you a top-secret mission to practice with? You think that could keep you occupied for a while?"

Harley's head snapped up and he turned to look at her in excitement. "Really? You'd do that?"

"Of course. But here's the deal..." she leaned closer for emphasis. "You can't tell *anybody* about it. Not even Tony."

"What? Why? Would it be something he wouldn't like? Would it get me in trouble? I-I-I can't make him mad again, I kinda like having a place to sleep y'know." He sounded a bit defensive, but Pepper quickly reached over and grabbed his hand to calm him down.

"Of course not Sweetie. And if he gives you any trouble if he finds out then I'll give him hell. Okay?"

Harley just looked at her skeptically, so she continued. "It's just practice."

"What do I need to do?"

"Well, first you have to pretend that you're an inside man," she smiled, nodding her head playfully with a teasing smirk, "you're here to get information from Tony Stark himself and report to your Boss... me."

"Sounds easy enough," Harley shrugged. "But why isn't Tony allowed to know?"

"That's the whole fun of it," Pepper grinned. "If he knows what you're trying to do, then he'll make it harder. But if you just go out of your way to get on his good side and get him to tell you things... that right there is how you con someone into getting what you want. Tony said you want to be a con man," she smiled at the thought, "so now's a good time to start practicing. And it won't hurt anything because you'll only be telling me. You just can't go telling others about what you know, but you're smart, so I'll trust that you won't do that."

Harley nodded along and furrowed his brows in thought. "How am I supposed to get back up here to talk to you without him knowing though?"

"Well, that's something you're just gonna have to figure out yourself." Pepper smiled.

“Hey, Pep,” Tony sighed, shedding his jacket as he walked into the penthouse. His eyes flickered to the TV, playing Aladdin, and the corners of his mouth rose in amusement. Pepper turned her head to smile at him and he rounded the couch to plop down next to her. He tucked his foot beneath his other leg and threw his arm over the back of the couch, around her shoulders, and he drew her closer, pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

“Was Little Miss wanting to watch Aladdin?” His hand slinked up to caress her stomach and he pressed another kiss, this time right in front of her ear.

She turned her head to look at him then reached up to cup his cheek and press a hard kiss to his lips. “Not quite.” She whispered against them, just in time for Tony to hear a high-pitched squeal.

“Tony!” His head snapped to the side. He saw the boy barreling towards him and before he had time to react, the kid had slammed into his legs, hugging them tightly.

“Uhh, hey. What’s up Bug?” he greeted in confusion. He reached out to pat his head awkwardly and he felt Pepper laughing beside him.

Peter finally released his legs and scrambled to get up on the couch. Tony assisted him in his struggles and by the time he was properly sitting up on his knees, facing them, he was beaming. His knees pressed into Tony’s thighs, but he ignored it because at least the kid was smiling now.

“Tell Tony what we did today Baby,” Pepper suggested with a warm smile. She rested her head on Tony’s shoulder and pressed closer into his side while she watched Peter animatedly recap every small thing they had done together that day.

“We-we draw! We-we pway wit’ bwocks,” he pointed to the mess of toys in front of the TV. “We wat’h TB! And-and we eat *sooo* mu’h food! Apples, Nanas, B’ueBewies, uhh... Eggs! Uhh... oh-oh and cookies too!”

Tony nodded along with him. It was nice to see him in such a good mood as an alternative to screaming his head off. “So, I take it you had a good day, then?”

Peter grinned and collapsed onto him, spreading out his limbs so he was sprawled across his lap, hissing like a snake in response. “Yesssss.”

He rolled over so he was on his back. His head had landed near Pepper and he looked up at her, grinning toothily as he reached his arms out for her.

“You want a kiss?” She cooed in a babyish voice. Tony just watched in fascination. Pepper bent down to press several kisses to the kid’s face, and the happy squeals and excited giggles that followed.

It was weird... and domestic... and just totally weird... but he liked it. It was nice to see Pepper so carefree and it was nice to see a little snippet of what was to come. He was pretty sure he’ll be able to do that with his own kid once the time comes.

“Well,” he laughed awkwardly, patting the kid on the stomach softly and turning to meet Pepper’s eyes. “I just came up to say hey and to get dressed. I’m gonna be going out to meet with Rogers tonight, so I’ll probably be a little late.”

“Okay,” Pepper smiled. She kissed him softly. “Be safe please. And I don’t want to smell any blood on those clothes or I’m sending you down to sleep on the couches in the lounge where everyone can see.”

“Yes ma’am.” Tony smiled.

Chapter End Notes

So I hope you guys enjoyed it!!! Also, if you have any suggestions, or if there are any specific scenes you'd like to see I'm more than willing to hear them. And I might even be able to fit them in. Filling out the in-between parts of the plot is the hardest part of writing I'm sure most of you know, so any help would definitely be appreciated.

And for sure call me out on any continuity issues or things that don't make sense. I try my best to keep it all... good, but I screw up a lot and I'd like to know so I can fix it. So thanks!

I love you all so much!! Thank you for your support!!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

So, we get a bit of backstory on Pepperony and a glimpse of bamf Tony.

Also, violence is a little heavier towards the end, so be warned. It's not super bad, but it's nothing like I've ever written before.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Aww, Ms. Riccio. Where do you think you’re going?”

At his prompting, the woman in question came to a startling halt. She smoothed out her partially unbuttoned blouse and brushed the hair out of her face before taking a slow breath and turning around with an elegant spin to flare out her skirt far enough to where she was sure he would be able to catch a glimpse of her panties.

“Well, Mr. Stark. I was simply going to freshen up.” She glanced back at the man lounging shirtless on the rumpled bed sheets with a sultry smile. Then, she snapped her neck elegantly, and her beautiful blond hair flowed in a long arch as it fell over her shoulder. That way she was able to catch a glimpse of her jewel decorated clutch that had been tossed haphazardly on the dresser during their little... scuffle. She was so close, yet so far.

“Hmm,” Tony hummed with a lazy smile working across his face as he slowly lifted himself from the bed, muscles taut and exposed for her to enjoy. “But I had just began to enjoy myself. Come back to bed dearie.”

She exaggerated a pout over her shoulder at him before turning her back to him once more to hide an annoyed scowl and a last glance towards the clutch.

“Of course,” she purred, “what was I thinking?”

“You weren’t thinking my dear Bambi,” Tony spoke softly, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind and dragging her backwards. He sighed once more as they collapsed on the bed and he pinned her wrists above her head. “Y’know,” he purred, pressing lingering kisses to the column of her throat, “your name just seems too good to be true.” He paused and pressed the tip of his tongue to her throat, listening to her heavy hiss that followed. “So beautiful. Bambi Riccio. Italian. Blonde. Leggy. Confident. Everything I love in a woman.” His breaths grew heavier. “How is that possible for you to be so perfect my dear? It almost seems like there’s a trick being played... nobody is ever this perfect.”

“Sometimes I wonder the same about you Anthony,” she sighs, arching up into him because she just needed to feel his skin. He was hovering, and the distance was driving her insane.

He growled out a chuckle into her ear. “You’re the only one I will ever allow to call me that.”

“What an honor that is Mr. Stark. Now please stop talking.”

She felt another breathy chuckle tickle her jaw. “But I haven’t finished yet.” He wrapped a string of her hair around his finger. She stayed silent, but her labored breathing continues.

“Y’know, I don’t think I have ever felt a connection like this with anybody. Almost like one of those cheesy bad boy romance novels.”

She hummed impatiently and barely had time to nod her head before Tony was pulling at her hair again to keep her still.

“I was also talking with Obadiah this morning. He was telling me about all the good you’ve done with covering our tracks with Stark Industries. Developing a separate bank account for incentives. Such a genius idea my dear. I think I’ve convinced myself to go buy a fancy tower in your honor. A beautiful Tower for such a beautiful woman.” She smiled lazily below him. “And do you know what name I’m going to be putting on the side.”

“What?” She whispered breathily. She was so dazed and dizzy she didn’t even notice that Tony had stopped his ministrations. Instead, he leaned forward to growl against her ear, low and guttural as his whiskery beard tickled her cheek when he pressed one last kiss there.

Then she felt the cool metal of a gun’s muzzle wedge between her ribs uncomfortably. She paused and her eyes snapped open to stare at him. His smug smile reached his eyes as he hovered over her, his teeth bared threateningly against his grinning mouth as he slowly leaned down to pepper several soft kisses against her open mouth, then moving to whisper softly into her ear.

The word was quiet, with a hint of amusement melded together with pure unadulterated glee and triumph, but she could hear it screaming and hammering against her skull as if he had yelled it; screamed it; shouted it from the rooftops. It made her heart beat and her mind scream... because he had figured her out.

It was over.

He’d surely kill her.

“Potts.”

“What are you grinning about?” Rhodey laughed as he pulled into the deserted parking lot behind an old warehouse on the south side of Brooklyn. He casted a look towards the man lounging in the seat beside him.

“Just thinking about Pepper,” he laughed. “Sometimes I wish I never told her I figured her out so quickly. I’m still curious about what she would’ve done?”

“She woulda drained our accounts and skedaddled. That’s what she would have done.” Rhodey responded curtly, putting the car in park and leaning back in his seat to get comfortable.

“Oh please,” Tony scoffed, “she obviously would have fallen in love with me before she left. She would have come crawling back within a year, I’m sure of it.”

“You really believe that?”

Tony glared at him and Rhodey laughed.

“It took forever for you to wear her down enough to get a date-”

“Wait,” Harley interrupted from the backseat, unbuckling his seatbelt and nearly vaulting himself over the center console in his excitement. Tony almost forgot he was there with them he had been so quiet. “So, like, she didn’t fall in love with you while she was conning you like in the stories?”

“Of course-”

“Heck no!” Rhodey laughed, purposefully cutting Tony off. “It took nearly a year of grovelling on his part.”

“Oh please. She was just pissy because I caught onto her little scheme. Her pride was just hurt... she was totally into me. I woulda done her so hard that night if I didn’t break the news. She was drooling all over me; totally into it. Head thrown back and everything. Nearly begging me to shut up and fu-”

“TMI dude!” Harley cried out, grimacing exaggeratedly as he fell back into his seat. Tony cackled in amusement.

“Tell me again why you brought the runt along?” Rhodey questioned with a sigh and a roll of the eyes, leaning back into the driver’s seat while his head fell to the side to fix his boss with an irritated glare.

Tony just smirked at him, tuning out the constant movement going on in the backseat... the kid didn’t seem to want to sit still. He even caught a glance through the rear view mirror of him peering suspiciously out the back window.

“He’s real pushy SourPatch, and he won’t shut up.” He directed that last statement to the jittering kid in the backseat to goad him on, but the kid didn’t seem to hear him. Because all of a sudden there was a lanky teenage boy vaulting his upper body over the center console yet again to gaze out the front windshield.

“Is this a stakeout, Boss? Or are we just, like, sitting here waiting for some Oscorp goons to shoot? Do you actually even shoot a ton of people, or were those all lies in a story too?”

“What do you mean *too*?” Tony sounded offended. He adjusted himself in his seat to turn and stare at the side of the kid’s head.

“Alright, that’s enough.” Rhodey sighed in annoyance, pressing the palm of his hand to the boy’s face and giving him a good shove to send him flying back into his seat. “Control your shadow, Boss.”

Tony reached into his jacket pocket as he settled Rhodey with a glare. “What have I told you about calling me that?” He pulled out a decent sized bag of Skittles... but then the kid was talking again.

“Do you not want me to call you that? Can I call you Tony, too? Is that cool? I think that would be cool.”

“No.” Tony answered stiffly, sharing an amused look with Rhodey. Then he turned around in his seat to look at the kid. “When did you start talking so much? Shut up and eat your Skittles.” He tosses the bag of candy at the boy’s chest, and he catches them deftly, immediately tearing it open as if he hadn’t eaten in ages.

“Geez kid, calm down. It’s just candy. Did Happy not feed you dinner or somethin’?”

Harley shook his head, mouth stuffed full of sweets, grinning in pure bliss. “He sai’ af’er prac’ice.”

Tony hesitates. “We’ll grab you something from McDonalds or somethin’ on our way back then. Right Rhodes? Can’t have the kiddo going hungry.”

“Whatever,” Rhodey gumbled with a small lining of humor around his tone. He fixed his gaze back

on the empty parking lot, and the car filled with an awkward silence except with the occasional soft crunches and loud smacks as Harley worked away at his candy.

“There he is,” Rhodey murmured, beginning to unbuckle his seatbelt as a black ForeRunner slowly glided into the parking lot with a soft rumble. The two headlamps overhead the entrance shine onto the tinted windshield of the car, bouncing off of the various puddles scattered around the empty lot. “Better late than never I s’pose.”

Tony chuckled under his breath and grabbed for the handle his passenger door. He used his foot to kick it the rest of the way open, leaning back in his seat to subtly check out each corner of the lot. Rhodey was already out of the car, and Tony didn’t think to pay any mind to his little tag along in the backseat as he tucked a spare knife into his jacket pocket... he had some candy to keep him occupied, so hopefully that would be enough.

He walked up to the large black SUV with Rhodes. Then, out stepped none other than Captain Steve Rogers himself. Black hooded jacket covering his button-up shirt, blue and red tie, and a dark ballcap to complete the look.

“Captain,” Tony greeted with a snarky grin. Steve nodded his head at him, his face bitten down into a disgruntled scowl as he threw the driver’s door shut behind him. “How’re the twins handling their new assignments on the squad?” Tony spoke with a devilish grin, sticking his hand out towards the man with his palm upturned expectantly.

The man grumbled under his breath as he shuffled around with his jacket. He pulled out a folded manilla envelope and slapped it into the smirking man’s hands with a scowl. “They’re doing fine. Kinda whiney and obnoxious though.”

“Oh please,” Tony scoffed, snatching the packet and stuffing it into his own jacket pocket. “Those Maximoff twins are my best rats. They’ll make you some fine dirty cops... just don’t start asking too many questions. They know what they’re doing.”

Steve rolled his eyes and shoved his hands in his pockets. Then there was the distinct sound of a car door slamming. All three men jumped to attention, whipping out their weapons with practiced ease, fingers resting itchy on the trigger. Rogers slowly pulled up his jacket hood as he trained the muzzle of his gun on the intruder. Tony’s mouth turned down into an irritated scowl as he fixed his gun in the direction of his black Audi... and there stood Harley with his hands raised.

“Don’t shoot! It’s me.”

Tony and Rhodey lowered their guns and Tony rolled his eyes, nodding for him to approach.

“Geez, kid. It’s no mystery how we kidnapped you so easy.” That seemed to be invitation enough for the kid to gain some confidence and walk up to the group with a slight swagger to his step. Tony could practically feel Rhodey’s irritation radiating off of him in waves... in all honesty, Tony found it funny more than anything. He did turn to catch Steve’s reaction though. He found his amusement slipping away, soon replaced with extreme displeasure when he found the man eyeing the boy suspiciously with his gun still raised to aim at the dead center of his forehead. Tony reached out and pushed the weapon down with a rough hand, and Steve whipped his head over to toss him an aggravated glare.

“I thought the Starks quit dealing in kids.” Steve accused, jutting an angry finger towards his chest, but refrained from actually touching him as Harley popped up at his right side.

“We don’t,” Tony answered simply, “but he got into some dangerous things with Oscorp. I either

let him shadow me till he's old enough to help, or I let him go and hope I don't find his body rotting in an alley."

"Well that's morbid." Harley piped up with a disgusted scowl. Tony gave him a side eye, looking him up and down. He ended up snorting loudly while trying not to laugh.

"When the hell did you become so mouthy?"

"He's always been mouthy." Rhodey answered with an irritated glare directed at the child. "He just shuts up when you're in the room, 'cause he's scared of you."

"I'm not scared of him!" Harley immediately protested, with a glare. "I just don't wanna piss him off, 'cause he can kill me easy."

Tony looked affronted. "Rhodey or Happy can kill you just as easy," he reasoned with a huffy chuckle.

Harley smirked at him and shot a side-eyed glance towards Rhodey. "Yeah, but you told 'em they can't, so they won't... 'cause they know we're connected and that you'd totally pummel 'em if they laid a hand on me."

"We are not connected," Tony scoffs indignantly, turning away from the teen.

"Sure are. Your wife told me so."

"My wi- Pepper?? When were you talking to Pepper?"

"I can totally kill you if I really wanted to," Rhodey grumbled under his breath, with his arms crossed defiantly over his chest. Harley just smirked at him and shrugged his shoulders with a patronizing shake of the head.

Steve cleared his throat. "Ahem. Can we please get back to business? I have to meet with the mayor tonight, and we have a lot to discuss."

"Holy crap! You're Steve Rogers! I didn't know you were a dirty cop!"

Steve's eyebrows narrow at the boy and Tony shakes his head in something similar to disappointed and frustrated disbelief.

"Oh my god. Just shut up, kid." Rhodey growled, shooting him a scathing glare.

"Be nice, Rhodey," Tony amended. Rhodey glared at the back of his head then turned to look at the kid who was wearing a wide, smug grin.

'Told you so' he mouthed. Rhodey *sooo* wanted to strangle him.

"What do you have for me this week, Steve? I've been seeing myself a lot on the news lately... can't say I hate the attention, but it's not all that great for a man in my line of work if you catch my drift. Especially not at a time like this." Tony ignored the two behind him and jumped straight back into what they met up for.

"You and I both know that's beyond my control, Stark. With the way you act sometimes, can you really blame people for thinking your leading Hydra... I mean... c'mon you gotta admit it makes sense," Tony rolled his eyes and scoffed at him. "Just do me a favor and refrain from maiming anyone these next few weeks. There's only so much attention I can draw away from you while

Ross is breathing down my neck to find you. Heck, he's got Hammer testifying against you, claiming the weapons you had sold to the government over the years had been a cover for the bombs you planted for all the terrorist attacks over the years. They're accusing you of some pretty heavy stuff Stark."

"Nothing they have against me will hold up in court. He knows that. And, y'know, it turns out I got a lot of innocent cheerleaders on the sideline. Believe it or not, there are normal people on my side. You do realize what kind of uproar there will be if he tries acting on that execution thing he's so set on, right?"

Steve sighed. "All I know is he put out a kill order for you. I don't even think he's wanting a trial. He's just spewing out lies to make people feel less upset when they found out an officer finally put a bullet between your eyes."

Tony waves it off as if Steve hadn't just told him every right-minded patriot in the country was out for his head. "Your men know better than to shoot at me, correct? I really, really don't enjoy gunfights with the cops as much as I used to in my younger years. They're always such a pain to cover up."

"Yes, but Stark, we can only do so much before the FBI steps in... Maybe you could just lay low for a while. Or maybe take the bodies upstate instead of leaving them around mangled and bloody for the citizens to find. It looks bad on us with so many open cases and no leads."

"What?" Tony scoffed, "so you want me to stop punishing the child molesters and wife-beaters and let 'em run rampant?"

"Yes, including any Oscorp or Hydra goons if you can help it. Just stick to the drug deals for a while maybe?"

Tony stared at him blankly.

"I think you've got it backwards Rogers. I'm the one who makes the rules here; this isn't like your precious little police station. I'm the boss, not you. I do what I want, and you and everyone else listens to me. People need to know that there are consequences for their actions, and tossing them in a protective box with three square meals a day and everything they could possibly need is not a fitting punishment. Especially when the victims of their crimes are the ones are forced to give their hard earned money to make sure these bastards keep living when all they deserve is a bullet between the eyes."

"Some people don't deserve death, Stark."

"Yes, but most do. The government and your stupid rules are corrupt and unjust. The law tends to leave the important parts of protecting and maintaining a safe and healthy society. You're too scared to do what needs to be done to make sure innocent people don't suffer. There are too many conflicts, too many viewpoints that matter. There's only one that's right, and if people would just listen and go along without putting up a fight, so much more could get done. Look me in the face Rogers and tell me that the reason you agreed to help me isn't because you agree with my ideals and the way I run things."

The Captain stared at him and didn't say a word.

"That's what I thought. I'll continue to do what I want to do. I'll continue running your city and keep things the way they should. You just need to do your job and direct the Feds to turn their head the other way."

"I can't protect you that way," Steve warned.

"I'm a big boy Rogers. I can protect myself," he paused and dug around in his pocket. "Oh, and here." He handed over a gold USB drive. "Those are a few Oscorp leaks. I had JARVIS look into them and there should be enough to put each of them away for a long time. At least 50. Just make sure you lock them up. Maximum security."

"How-how-when-" The man stuttered as he grabbed onto the drive eagerly.

"Oscorp's been pissing me off lately. I'm done playing nice with them."

"Why are you giving this to me? You usually take care of anything involving Oscorp, and Shield yourself."

"Oh, I'll take care of them eventually. I just need to make a bit of a distraction for them; they're working on something big and I need to get a handle on it before it gets too far. Romanoff and a few others are actually scoping the place out as we speak. Plus, I just wanna kick Osborn down a peg or two... he's gettin' too cocky. I need to remind him of whose in charge."

Steve and Tony go back and forth for a few more minutes, exchanging important information about Hydra and Oscorp. Rhodey stood at Tony's left side stiffly, and Harley kept silent as he absorbed the information. It was the first time he got any worthwhile information about Stark's organization and how things were ran beneath the surface... the man was so... so careful, and he knew exactly what he was doing. It was really quite interesting how he was able to finagle things in such a way to get exactly what he wanted. Two minutes into the discussion and Harley had plenty of information about Hydra and Oscorp, and the rivalry that's quickly developing to run back to Pepper which she'd no doubt praise him for. Now, the only thing was finding a way to talk to her again without alerting Tony or Happy... Then he thought about Oscorp and what they would do if he came back to pour all of Stark's secrets that he's learned right in their laps... and they'd no doubt praise him too. They might even let him go out on his own... give him more responsibility. Then he thought about Peter and the way his own father treated him versus how Tony and Pepper treated him. The way he adored Pepper and constantly asked about Tony, and how very seldom it used to be for Peter to ever ask for Richard. He thought about how he himself had been treated, how dismissive and abusive Oscorp had been towards him. How different Stark was, despite being known as a deadly man when crossed. Stark and his men were a real family, they laughed and joked and played games... of course they teased Harley to no end too, but at least he didn't get tossed scraps for dinner, or get beat consistently every week.

Oscorp had killed his family... took away his entire life, and Tony gave him a new one. So he made up his mind right there and then to stick to Tony's side. He'd do what Pepper asked, and he'd prove to everyone that he was good enough to work side by side with the great Tony Stark. Then Tony would have no choice but to recruit him when he was old enough, and he'd never have to leave.

Before he knew it. Tony was spouting off a months worth of instructions to Steve. Varying between assignments for the twins, planned raids on Oscorp facilities to ignore, and how to deal with Ross and the FBI.

"One more thing," Steve said, holding up a finger and moving to open up the backdoor of his car. He tugged out a thrashing, dark-skinned man by the collar and let him drop to the asphalt, right next to the spare tire. His hands were tied uncomfortably behind his back and he visibly winced when he landed on top of them.

"This was an old CI of mine I used to grab intel on Oscorp and other small gangs that I fed off to

you... then he tried to be smart and almost got me and Bucky killed on an unrelated undercover op.”

“That’s ‘cause I found out you were working with that bastard Stark!” The man spat, shooting a pointed glare at the sharply-dressed man standing over him. He made no effort to stand.

Steve ignored the outburst. “I’m sure he still has a lot more to tell, so I thought I might hand him off to you to get more out of him before he goes and outs me and Buck.”

“You’d deserve it you conniving bastard!” The man growled, writhing around against his restraints to spit on the man’s shoes.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Rhodey chimed in with a roll of his eyes. He slowly made his way over, dragging his hands out of his pockets to grasp the front of the man’s jacket and tug him up to his feet roughly.

Tony paid him no mind as Rhodey fought against the struggling man. He looked back over to Steve, discreetly putting an arm out in front of the kid beside him to push him away from the small, controlled scuffle.

“What’s his name? Affiliation?”

“Sam Wilson,” Steve answered blankly. “Washed up Military officer after a severe injury. Doesn’t really know how to mind his own business. Got caught up with drugs and alcohol. No family, no home. His friends call him Free Willy.” Steve chuckled under his breath.

Tony nodded and smiled slightly. Then he turned back to Steve with light in his eyes, as if he had just remembered something. “Barnes will be getting an offer for a large promotion by the way. Tell him to take it and to report back to me with whatever information he finds.”

“What’s the offer?” Steve questions.

“You’ll find out soon enough. Just remember that it’s rude to say no to the President of the United States.” Tony winked at him. “Keep in touch.” With that, Tony waved at him dismissively and turned to face the quarrelling men in hopes it would end soon so they could get back to the Tower. He’d been spending less and less time with Pepper as work became more and more demanding with all the drama. He was just itching to crawl into bed beside her and kiss her goodnight.

“Kid,” Rhodey grunted, struggling to restrain the fighting man, “stop being useless. Get over here and help me drag him to the car.”

Tony would have interjected, but the teen was already rushing past him, without any thought, straight towards the two men. He reached them and made a dive for the man’s legs to try and restrain them... not a smart kid. The larger man didn’t even hesitate to aim a hard kick right to the center of the kid’s chest, sending him skidding across the concrete, ending up sprawled out on his back with his arms cradling his sides.

“Heck man,” Harley grunted, wincing through the pain as he fought himself to stand back up, because only pussy would lay there on the ground and nurse his wounds. “Not cool dude-”

He had no more time to react further. Stark pulled him to his feet with rough hands, grabbing onto his face harshly and gliding purposeful hands along his sides. He was proud of his ability to hold back the winces and whines when he ran his belligerent hand over a particular sore spot along his ribs. His brows were creased in worry as he examined Harley from head to toe for any deadly injuries.

When he'd finished Tony didn't look happy at all, and the sounds of the scuffling had come to a dead halt.

"You're okay, Kid. No broken ribs " The man stated bluntly, a sour look crossing over his face as he released Harley from his rough hold and forced him behind his body with a strong, guiding arm. Harley stumbled a bit, and by the time he regained his balance, Tony had stepped up to the now frightened man and forced him out of Rhodey's grip with a harsh tug on the lapels of his jacket. Rhodey steps to the side and gladly lets Tony take over as he pushes the dirty, drunk man against Steve's black SUV with his fist curled in his collar. A second after that and his suit clad knee was brought up firmly between his legs.

The man buckled at the knees, crying out in an angry squeak as Tony hurried to take advantage of the new position to tower over the taller man threateningly. The knee came up again and this time pushed into the man's stomach, and Harley swore he heard a distinct crack. He winced uncomfortably at the sound, and he didn't have much time to dwell on it because then Tony's fist was lifting to pound on the man's face with his other hand squeezing around his neck.... The man was turning blue. He tried to fight back, but it was useless, because Tony would parry each attack and come back with an even stronger blow which was followed by an even louder crack. It wasn't very long before blood was gushing from every part of the man's face.

By that time, Wilson's his body was all but lifeless as he slumped forward on Tony. Stark released him and he fell to the ground like a ragdoll, moaning and groaning as blood spilled quickly and pooled around him, leaking into a patch of murky water, giving it a harsh red velvet like sheen. Blood coated Tony's bruised knuckles, and speckles of it dotted his crisp white shirt from where it hadn't been protected by his jacket.

He stooped down into a crouch, grabbing onto the man's unhinged jaw in such a way it reminded Harley of their first meeting. Stark's eyes still shown in anger, and his mouth was pulled down into a sharp scowl. Wilson's mouth open, teeth bared and grinning with a look of unendurable agony as he choked on the blood spilling from his mouth, weak hand reaching up to grapple at Stark's larger one in a helpless attempt to release himself from the crushing grip.

"Don't you *ever* touch that kid again."

Chapter End Notes

I know this fic has been lacking a lot of Tony and Peter interactions, but I promise they are coming and they are going to melt your heart! Anybody that knows me knows that I can't go too long without some good iron-dad fluff so don't lose hope. But it feels kinda unnatural right now for Tony to get so attached to Peter right away, especially considering all the stress and craziness going on. So that just makes it easier to write Harley in with him cuz hes older. But, yeah... I just finished a heavy heavy iron-dad/bamf Tony chapter (you can probably guess what that ones about) so it's definitely coming soon. There will be major developments between their relationship over the next few chapters, so don't worry guys :)

I really appreciate everyone that has been loyally reading and commenting so thank you so much! Also, fyi, I *do* live in central Florida *ahem*hurricane*ahem* so if I don't update for a while... I either died or my power went out. so yeah. Last times I had friends who didn't get their power back on for an entire month. Goodness, I hope that

doesn't happen to me... so yeah. We'll see what this thing does, but I promise I'm continuing, so don't freak out too much if I go off the grid for a while lol.

Also, let me know if you have any suggestions or anything... I think I've said this before, but I have no idea how the whole mob thing is supposed to work. I'm literally grasping at strings here... so any corrections or help you can offer would be awesome.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pepper lounged quietly on the couch, reading *another* book. There was just nothing else to do, because Tony was always so paranoid about everything, convinced anything and anyone had the potential to stress her and the baby, quite literally, to death... so that just left her with *books*. She had spent her entire day playing with Peter and watching Disney movies, but now he was fast asleep.

It happened without warning. One moment he was his usual hyper, chattering self, and then he had curled himself against Pepper as she read him a book that he had insisted on her reading to him, and he conked out before she even made it halfway through. She's not saying she's happy she didn't have to read 'Aliens Love Underpants' in its entirety, but she was happy Peter passed out when he did.

She gently lowered him onto the cushions of the couch, tucking a throw pillow beneath his head and pulling over the blanket balled up in the corner of the couch to drape it over him so he was snuggled in a warm cocoon. Then, she had JARVIS call Happy to come pick him up.

It was only 8:00, so it didn't take very long for a usual grumpy Happy to stroll into the penthouse, looking just a tiny bit peevisish. Pepper looked up from her book to smile at him.

"Hi, Happy," she greeted softly. Then she nodded downwards, towards Peter curled up tightly on the couch. Her hand lowered and combed through the boy's hair for only a moment before she braced her hands on her knees, straining to stand up. Happy immediately rushed forward to help her off the couch, but she swatted him away, insisting that she could '*stand by myself Hogan, thank you very much*'. Instead, Happy backtracked and lowered his hand in a move to shake the sleeping child awake, but Pepper quickly swatted his hand away and scolded him.

"Don't you dare wake him up. He's sleeping. Just carry him down to his room and tuck him in."

"Yes ma'am," Happy grumbled, crouching just a little so he could gently lift the tiny child from the soft cushions of the couch. Peter mumbled sleepily against him, eyes flickering open as he blearily looked around before dropping his head heavily on Happy's shoulder.

"Ony?" The kid mumbled under his breath with a questioning lilt as he snuggled closer to Happy.

"Nope," Happy answered snappishly as he fought to pull away the blanket that had caught itself between Peter and his arm. "It's Happy."

Peter whined miserably against him, shuffling uncomfortably in his arms. "Nooo," he moaned helplessly, "ony."

Happy was about to retort, not at all hurt by the kid preferring his boss over him... he's never been overly fond of kids anyways. But before he could snap, Pepper was stepping closer. Her voice was soft and calming as she reached a hand out to rub Peter's tiny back soothingly.

"It's okay Peter," she cooed, "just go back to sleep. Maybe you can see Tony tomorrow if he's not too busy."

Peter obviously wanted to argue, because his frustrated moaning and his shifting continued.

“Fine,” he huffed. That seemed to be enough, because at that, he conked out again,. He went limp in Happy’s arms, hands that had been barely clutching the collar of his shirt dropped away, and the legs he had wrapped around the man’s waist fell to hang limply in the air. Happy grunted before adjusting him again.

He said goodnight to Pepper, and left... and Pepper found herself alone with a book once more.

Two hours later, Peter was jolting awake in his bed. His body stilled, eyes wide, and breaths wild before the remnants of a nightmare crept in the background of his mind and he released a loud, ear-piercing wail.

“MAMA!!!” He screamed, thrashing against the sheets as he sobbed. “Mama! Mama! MAMA!”

The picture of his father towering over him with a long needle in his hand was right there in the forefront of his mind, and he threw himself around the bed to try and escape the familiar face. He didn’t know how long he was crying before the door across the room was being thrown open, flooding the small space with a pale, yellowish light from the hall. It illuminated the plain blue bedspread that had been kicked onto the floor in his panic.

His screams and wails quickly dwindled into sorrowful sobs and whimpers when he spotted the large, familiar silhouette lingering in the doorway. “Mama? Mama? P’ease.”

“Peter, hey.”

Happy.

Peter felt a hand land on his hair, and he immediately pushed his head against it, revelling in the small form of comfort. “Hap-Happy,” he sobbed pitifully, eyes snapping closed once more as he hunkered down on himself. “I wan-I wan-I wan my MAMA!” A series of short hiccups followed the outburst and Peter found himself being lifted from the toddler-sized bed and tucked close to a large chest.

“It’s okay Kid,” Happy offered in a quiet whisper. Peter felt him begin to rock and bounce, but that didn’t seem to help the numb stuttering in his chest and the unexplainable need to see Pepper.

“Mama, p’ease.” Peter begged, huddling in closer to the man with his arms clutching his shirt.

“Your Mama’s not here Peter,” Happy answered... and for the first time there was a hint of remorse in his tone as he delivered the bad news to the distressed child.

“Nooo,” he moaned, “noooo. No-no-no-no! Mama! Mama! PepPep! P’ease!”

“Oh...” Happy breathed out quietly. “Okay, yeah. Sorry Kid. I didn’t know you meant Pepper.” Peter, luckily wasn’t able to see Happy’s grimace. The man just couldn’t help but dread what kind of drama and heartbreak this was going to dredge up for the child when Tony found out... if he found out. Tony liked the kid sure... but oh goodness... he probably wouldn’t think it a good thing that Parker’s son was calling his wife ‘Mama’. So, Happy just forced himself to blame it on Peter’s apparent nightmare and left it at that.

He exited Peter’s recently decorated room and addressed JARVIS as he continued his rhythmic bouncing.

“Call Pepper please, JARVIS.”

He was glad that nobody else was up and wandering around the sleeping quarters, so he just hovered in the hall outside Peter's room and waited for Pepper to answer, listening to Peter's quiet murmurings of 'Mama' over and over.

"Happy? What's wrong?" Pepper's voice rang out from JARVIS speakers. "Is everyone okay? Did something happen to Tony? Is Peter alright?"

Happy faltered for a second. "Well, no- I mean... kinda... Peter seemed to have a nightmare and he was asking for you. I know it's kinda late, but do you mind if I bring him up to see you. I think it'll make 'im-"

"Yes-yes of course. Bring him up."

So, that's what Happy did. He consoled Peter the entire journey to the penthouse, promising that he was taking him to see Pepper. It didn't help. Peter continued to cry, blubbering on and on about the terrible things he had seen in his nightmares. Happy didn't like what he was saying, but he understood that the situation was going to be taken care of relatively soon, so he held his tongue and continued his bouncing.

When the elevator doors opened to the penthouse, JARVIS instructed him to meet Pepper in the master bedroom where she was waiting for them. So, Happy hurried down the hall, eager to push off the distressed child onto someone that was actually capable of handling him. Consoling a child after a nightmare went far beyond his job description.

"Oh Baby," Pepper cooed softly, mouth falling into a worried frown as she reached for the child in Happy's arms. Happy gladly handed the child over to the woman sitting up in bed, and retreated to wait in the Living Room. "Hey, what's wrong Baby?"

"Mama?" Peter whimpered, blinking owlishly up at her through watery eyes.

Pepper's face falls into something between shock and wonderment and she pulls the boy closer. Peter simply curls into her, succumbing to relieved sobs and tearful chants once more. "Mama Mama Mama Mama." Pepper couldn't find anything to say.

She understood that it was perfectly normal for Peter to look at her like that. For all she knew, she's the first womanly influence in Peter's life since his mother died two years ago... probably too long ago for Peter to remember anything more than the only source of love and support he's ever had in his life. She understood. She did. She could understand why Peter might call her that in the heat of the moment like this. He had just turned four a couple months ago... he was still so young. He probably didn't even fully understand the meaning of a mother and father.

She eventually found her tongue when Peter's cries started to die down. "What happened Baby?" She asked softly

"M'Daddy," Peter answered quietly, nuzzling further into her neck. "M'Daddy was there. 'ony gave me back and m'daddy was mad a' me. I don' wanna ever go back p'ease. I don' wanna go, I don' wanna go."

Pepper rocked him slowly. "You don't have to go anywhere Peter," she kissed the top of his head. "Now, tell me what your Daddy was mad at you for."

"Cuz-cuz-cuz I like 'ony better than him an-an-and I-I-I 'old Tony wha' m'daddy did." Pepper found her heart breaking, and before she knew it, tears were pouring down her cheeks too... stupid hormones.

“What is it that your daddy did that you told Tony, Peter?” She pressed further. Peter hadn’t spoken a word about his father since that day Tony had brought him up in a similar state, screaming for his mother, with a completely different motive.

“I tol’ him he kill my Mommy. An-an I tol’ him ‘bout the needles.” Peter shuddered against her. “The needles are so scawy, PepPep.”

Pepper found herself panicking now.

“What needles Peter?”

“He-he poke’ me with needles when I was bad cuz-cuz he need-need to test his science. He say he ran out of rats and need to-to use me to test his im-im-innity stuff... it was red and scawy. So scawy... he did lots of ‘em. He say I needed lots more shots cuz he didn’ wan’ me to die when he try da poison later... which is good I guess,” Peter sighed softly, “I like dat he didn’ wan’ me to die... I still didn’ like da needles.”

Pepper held back the panicked gasp, and it festered in her throat so much that she could hardly breathe.

“Peter,” she spoke earnestly, hugging him tight, “what poison? Did he ever give you the poison?”

Peter shook his head slowly and Pepper found herself being able to breathe again.

“Ms. Tasha too’ me to Tony ‘fore he coul’... I don’ wan’ ‘im to put poison in me PepPep. I don’ wanna go back.”

“You never have to go back Peter. I promise you. I won’t let you go back, and Tony won’t let you go back. You’re safe with us here, okay?”

She lowered them both down so they were laying properly on the bed. She hugged Peter close, tucking him nicely into her side. “Why don’t you sleep up here with me tonight so you don’t have to worry about anymore nightmares?”

Peter nodded and yawned quietly.

Pepper sighed in relief. She had made the request more for her own sanity than for Peter’s. She didn’t think she’d be able to let him out of her sigh anytime soon.

It wasn’t long before she felt Peter’s breaths even out, and she finally let herself succumb to her anger. Her face bit down into a harsh scowl and she cursed and cursed and cursed, promising to rip off Richard Parker’s head for hurting and scaring her baby.

If Tony didn’t find him and kill him soon, she’d have to go out and do it herself.

Tony ended up being the one having to drive back. Harley sat comfortably in the passenger’s seat, and Rhodey was downgraded to the backseat with the recently duck-taped Sam Wilson because they weren’t able to fit him in the trunk (“*Goddamnit Tony! I told you to clean out the trunk weeks ago!*”) and Tony wasn’t about to let Harley sit anywhere near him. Especially not when the kid was subtly trying to ease the pain from earlier by massaging his sore side.

After a few minutes of uninterrupted silence, accompanied by the pained moans of their prisoner in the back, the kid finally spoke up and Tony had to bite back an irritated sigh.

“So... like... that was Steve Rogers... the most honorable Police Captain in the NYPD?”

“Yep.” Tony answered bluntly, keeping his eyes fixed on the dimly lit road.

“So I was right?” Harley pressed, shuffling in his seat to lean just a little bit closer as if he were going to share a secret. “He’s a dirty cop?”

“In a way,” Tony shrugged with a sigh. “He just finally realized that the people running the government are all biased, incompetent idiots and he couldn’t deny the fact that I’m one of the few people with a good head on their shoulders that can keep society under control.”

“So, like... what’s he do then? Does he feed you super secret intel to beat up people he secretly wants to beat up but can’t ‘cause he’s supposed to be pretendin’ to be a good guy? Does he, like, go into the evidence room and burn all the stuff with your blood and DNA on it so they can’t use it to throw you in prison?”

Tony raises an eyebrow and turns his head to shoot the kid a look.

“No.” He responds slowly. “He just does whatever I tell him to do.”

“Oh,” Harley hums, “cool-cool.” His voice lowers a couple octaves as he crosses his arms awkwardly over his chest and leaned back in the seat.

And just like that, the car falls back into a comfortable silence. Nobody speaks a word until they're driving down a road illuminated by the bright yellow light shining from the familiar golden arches a ways down, and then they're pulling into the McDonalds drive-in.

“Whatcha want kid?” Tony turns to look at Harley with an expectant look on his face.

Harley’s eyes are wide as he glanced between Tony and the menu as if he couldn’t quite believe it was real.

“Wait, you were serious?”

Tony scoffed, affronted that the kid would question the fact that Tony said he’d feed him. “I’m not going to let you starve. Now hurry up and pick what you want.” While Harley scanned over the menu, Tony glanced in the rearview mirror to eye Rhodey. “Want anything Rhodey?”

“Just order me a diet coke and a BigMac.” Tony nodded and risked a small glance at the other man in the backseat. He snorted in amusement at the puzzled look on his face... as if he couldn’t quite believe they were sitting in a McDonalds drive thru just after he had been beat up and kidnapped... honestly, Tony couldn’t quite believe it either.

“Can I get a McFlury?” Harley questioned confidently. Tony looked at him.

“You just had an entire pack of skittles. Don’t you think you’ve had enough sugar? It’s already past your bedtime.”

“I don’t have a bedtime,” Harley argued with a sneer. “I’m not a *baby*. Peter barely even has a bedtime.”

Tony frowns. “Well that’s about to change... now tell me what you want.”

“I told you what I wanted,” Harley retorted smugly, eyeing Tony defiantly.

“You can’t just have ice cream for dinner. You need real food... or at least as real as this craphole

will serve you. Now hurry up and make a decision.”

Harley frowned and turned back to the menu. “If I order real food, can I get a McFlury too?”

Tony just grunted. “Whatever. Just tell me what you want.”

Harley grinned in triumph and spouted off his order, being sure to enunciate the words ‘*M&M McFlury*’. Tony rolled his eyes and reached over to shove him playfully, and he turned his head to face the intercom so the kid wasn’t able to see his smirk.

They get the food. Tony hands it all over to Harley so he can sort it out, and then he's peeling away from the dingy restaurant, tires squealing as he sped away. He couldn’t get away fast enough.

"Here Rhodey," Harley announced, reaching to hand off the burger to the man in the backseat. Then he turns back around to grab the diet coke and hand that back to him as well... he does his best to ignore Sam, because he was covered in dried blood and it was kinda nasty, but he couldn't himself. The look on his face was funny, and he seemed a bit more lucid than he had been when Rhodey first dragged him into the car.

"This is yours I think Tony... I meant Boss! Sorry." Harley sheepishly hands over the small burger that he had already partially unwrapped so the man could start eating it.

"It's fine," Tony muses as he grabs the burger, ignoring the slip. It wasn’t even a big deal, he had been partially joking when he told the kid he wasn’t allowed to call him that earlier in the evening. Apparently the kid was still, justifiably, a bit terrified of him. "Don't spill anything on that seat, kid. If you make a mess, you're cleaning it up."

Harley nods mutley and starts on the nuggets he asked for. The car falls back into silence as they eat, and Tony finds himself watching the kid scarf down his food more than he finds himself watching the road. The kid eat like he's starved, which he probably was before Tony found him...

It made his gut churn and his bones feel heavy. He found himself gripping the steering wheel tighter and before he knew it he was spiralling into a fervent splurge of bad thoughts he should have left behind years ago. Memories of his father, and his time at the Ten Rings riles up his anxiety, and he finds his fingers cramping from the strength of his grip. He breathes deep and slow, pushing the thoughts away and instead began digging through the small observations he had made of Harley that had at the time seemed irrelevant, or just another plain-old quirk.

The boy was quick-witted, long-winded, and apologetic. He hovered, yet steered clear of others. Heck, the kid found himself spending more time with the potatoes than anyone else that wasn't named Happy, Rhodey, or Tony. He had a tendency to ramble, backtrack, and voice unsure opinions so fervently that he began to convince himself of the opposite. His entire snarky, excitable demeanor would change at the slightest snap of the finger, and he'd find himself hunching in on himself at the slightest mistake, as if afraid he were going to be punished... in short... the kid was abused. Tony growled under his breath at the thought, because he knew - he *knew* better than anyone.

The kid didn't have parents. For all Tony knew, this past week was the first time anyone had shown him any kindness. His father was gone, mother and sister dead for who knew he long... and the kid blamed himself.

Boy, was that a mess to clean up, or what?

Before Tony could delve into any potential solutions he was pulling into the garage beneath the

famous Stark Tower. It housed Stark Industries, the mask, and main revenue for their little mob family thing they've got going. It was most definitely a prominent and ostentatious building, and he loved the irony of it. He may or may not have plastered his name across a skyscraper with the intent to rub it in Ross' face years back when he was first elected. *"Hey idiot! Over here! Here I am! The criminal mastermind of the century! I've killed hundreds of people and everyone knows it, come arrest me!"*... Yeah... but they didn't have any proof to arrest him and that's what made it so friggin fantastic.

The two usual young men guarding the elevator entrance stood, slouching and drooping, but as soon as the car drifted into the garage, their backs straightened and their eyes brightened to look alert. Harley laughed at them, glad to know he wasn't the only one terrified of his boss.

Then, Tony threw open his door, spewing out orders towards the two men to assist Rhodey in getting a handle on the man in the backseat. Harley shuffled around distractedly trying to escape from the confines of the car quickly, because Tony was already walking away and he didn't want to be left alone again... not after the adventurous night he's had. Sure, being around Tony scares him a bit... but it's a lot more scary when he's not around. He thought back onto what Pepper had told him, how he should just try and be more comfortable. He knew Tony wasn't going to hurt him... he knew that. He also knew him to be a drug dealer, loan shark, weapons-developer, and full time murderer...

"Lock him away. No food and no sleep, but have Dr. Banner come in and check on him to make sure he doesn't die during the night before I get a chance to talk to him." Tony barks out orders as he walks away, back turned towards the car and the men as he strides towards the elevator with his hands in his pockets.

"Hey, Boss!" Harley shouted hurriedly after scrambling out of the car. The man paused on his trek to the elevator turned to look at the kid over his shoulder, giving Harley just enough time to scurry up to his side.

"Whatcha want Kid?" Tony asks stiffly, shoving his hands into his pockets without breaking his stride.

"Oh-well, um... I just wanted to say thanks I guess..." Harley fibbed with his head lowered, wringing his hands together in front of him as they both step into the spacious elevator.

"For what?" Tony asked suspiciously.

"For letting me tag along, for beating that dude up when he kicked me, for not making me sit in the backseat with him, for being nice to me, for teaching me how to do-"

"Alright, that's enough. I think I get the point." Tony interrupts with a roll of his eyes.

"Well I mean it," Harley defends sternly. "I think you're pretty cool. I totally forgive you for what happened days ago... it was technically my fault," he saw Tony stiffen angrily and he immediately backtracked. "Sorry-sorry. Probably shouldn't have brought that up... but I can kinda get why normal people respect you so much. I never really got it until I came here... but I do get it now."

"Hmm," Tony humms distractedly with a nod of his head, but apparently that wasn't enough because Harley asked another question.

"Why are you so different from all the other evil dudes?"

"Different how?" He questioned, raising an eyebrow curiously.

“Well...” Harley pondered slowly, “you’re like... nice? I mean-c’mon. There was a lady months ago who got hurt during a gunfight between you and Oscorp, and, like, you paid all her medical bills! So, I mean... that was nice of you, right? Evil dudes don’t usually do that...” He trailed off quietly when he caught Tony staring down at him.

“Are you asking me or are you telling me?” Tony scolded, narrowing his eyes.

“Uhhh,” Harley started helplessly, eyes widening in panic. The facade only lasted a couple seconds before Tony laughed and clapped him on the shoulder with a wide smile on his face.

“Just messin’ with ya kid. I know what you mean.” Tony chuckled, and Harley laughed nervously along with him. “I just kinda hate being the bad guy sometimes... Don’t go blabbing this conversation to the other soldiers though, you hear me? It’s always good for there to be a healthy amount of respect. I don’t need them thinking I’ve gone soft or somethin’.” Tony paused for a moment, contemplating if he *really* wanted to have a discussion like this with the kid, but he supposed it would be a good teaching opportunity. He watched as the numbers displayed above the elevator doors slowly increased as he started his story.

“My Dad was a bit of a jerk... he was cruel and just- let’s just say he did some things that I don’t necessarily agree with. I kinda hated him for it as a kid, but it was just the way he was; just a typical mob boss... That’s the type of reputation he had built for the Starks, and it’s taken me years to reestablish a few good standards and it’s taken even longer for people to understand that I won’t put up with anything less. My father could have cared less about others well-being. He’d kill a man without a thought,” he hummed lightly and closed his eyes as he remembered a certain occasion. “I remember one day, I was Peter’s age, maybe a little older... a guy was dragged into my Dad’s office. He had borrowed maybe 200 bucks to repair his old deadbeat car... ‘cause, you know he had to get to work to feed his family and he’d spent his last paycheck on the house payment... I actually knew him. I knew his daughter... they were all really nice, they just never had a lot of money,” he sighed again and opened his eyes to look down at Harley. He needed to make sure the kid got the point. “He killed him. Shot him right between the eyes because he was late on his payment. So, ever since that day, I promised never to hurt someone that didn’t deserve it.” He saw Harley’s eyes widen and Tony quickly lightened the mood with a joke before the air in the elevator got to heavy. “I always like tickin’ him off for no reason. It was always fun till he reddened my hide with his belt later that night... I was a stupid kid.” Tony paused to cast the kid a small smile.

“My Mom though... she was one of the nicest people you could’ve ever met. She cared so much and everyone loved her, and very rarely did anyone ever dare disrespect her. She may have been nice, but boy... if you ever crossed the line with her, she wouldn’t hesitate to set you straight after chewing your head off and spitting it out at your feet,” he smirked at the memories of his mother. “So, over the years I’ve come to find out that if you’re nice to someone and you don’t threaten to blast their brains all over the room all the time, they typically start to like you back, and that right there my boy,” he claps a hand on Harley’s shoulder, “is the first step to respect. Trust and respect are your best friends for people like us, understand?” Harley nodded his head vehemently and Tony smiled, dropping his hand from his shoulder and glancing back at the numbers. They were almost to the penthouse.

“Plus, it’s not all that fun to be a stuck up jerk all the time. Remember that Keener. You won’t ever get any friends if you’re a jerk. You’ll only get respect through blinded fear, and that isn’t true respect. That’s how you get yourself stabbed in the back. You need to command respect, and you need to deserve it. Do you understand?”

Harley nodded quickly, eyes wide and arms stiff at his side.

“Happy and Peter might still be up here. I’ll send you and Peter down to the living quarters with him.”

Harley nodded again and he doesn’t say a word. Tony’s only slightly thankful that the kid had finally shut up. The elevator doors open when they reach the penthouse level and the pair step out into the entrance of the spacious Living Room, where no living soul could be seen. Not that Tony could blame them, it was 11:00 at night

“Sir,” JARVIS pipes up, “it appears you have blood on your clothes, and Mrs. Stark has explicitly told you many times to not step foot in your room if you wreaked of any bodily fluids.”

Tony glances down and pinches at his white shirt. Sure enough... it was speckled with blood. His hand was smeared with a small coating of dried blood... he had tried wiping them off with napkins in the car, but there was only so much he could do at the time.

“Crap.”

“Does she- um. Does she not like that you hurt people or something like that?” Harley questioned in a whisper, casting a weary glance to the sleeping man sprawled across the black sofa. He panicked slightly at the idea of having to report back to Pepper about her husband beating up dudes at night if she didn’t like him doing it. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what kind of drama that would dredge up.

“Nah, she can be as vicious as my mother when she wants to be. She’s just going through that pregnancy thing and she can’t stand the smell of blood. I swear she nearly ripped my head off one night ‘cause I forgot... got kicked to the couch and everything.”

“Wow...” Harley trails off with a low whistle and Tony continues to grumble to himself.

“Hey, kid. Do me a favor would ya. Grab me a change of clothes. Second drawer down on the left-”

“Wait,” Harley startled, eyes wide, “you want me to go in your room?”

Tony stares at him incredulously. “Yes. That’s where my clothes are. Now hurry along, I’m exhausted and I wanna go to bed. Grab me a shirt and some sweatpants while I go wash up. Don’t wake Pepper if she’s asleep.”

Then with that, he walks off and leaves Harley to spin in a helpless circle, trying to figure out where exactly this bedroom he spoke of was.

“I’ll show you the way, sir.” JARVIS speaks up as a light next to a hallway begins to flicker. Harley follows curiously and sure enough, it leads him right to the outside of a pair of large double doors. He hesitates... Pepper might be in there.

He cracks the door open and peaks in. He sees someone’s shadow casting along the wall next to the doorway - whom he assumes must be Pepper’s - shift, and he shuffles into the room before he was maimed for being a surprise intruder. He had met Pepper already of course, and, sure, she was nice, but he had heard horror stories about the woman, and he didn’t want to end up on her bad side so early on.

“Mrs. Stark? You’re awake.” The woman was sitting up against the headboard, reading a book by the soft glow of a lamp.

“Oh, Harley,” she smiled, “it’s so nice to see you again.” She spoke in a hushed tone, and Harley

just vaguely registered the small lump and head of curls cuddled beside her. “What are you doing here so late? You should be in bed.”

“Oh-um-um Tony asked me to grab him a change of clothes since he got some blood on the ones he’s wearing now.”

Pepper’s smile dropped into a frown and she fixed Harley with a stern gaze as she slowly studied them.

“You were there?” She concluded with a small, irritated huff.

“Uhhh, yes?”

Her eyes narrowed further. “It wasn’t too graphic was it? He knows better.”

“Oh! No ma’am. He was very um-um aware of my presence. I mean he did beat up the dude ‘cause he kicked me.” Harley quickly jumped to Tony’s defense. He didn’t want to risk getting the man in trouble so early on.

“The dude did *what* to you?”

“It was an accident. It wasn’t the Boss’ fault, I promise. I was just being stupid.”

Pepper’s lips quirked up at the corners and Harley didn’t really know why.

“Why are you so quick to defend Tony, hmm?”

Harley’s brows furrowed, and he scuttled across the room towards the dresser to distract himself and hide his reddening cheeks. “I-I-I don’ know. He’s nice I guess...” His voice drops to shy whisper as he rifles through the clothes distractedly. “He’s cool. I want ‘im to like me... so-so that I can find out more stuff for you of course.”

Pepper hums again in acknowledgement and Harley turns around just in time to catch her warm smile. He drapes the clothes over his arm and shyly hangs his head to stare at his shoes.

“I’m sure he likes you just fine. Just like I told you, you are one of his favorites.” Pepper affirms. Harley perks up and stares at her with a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

“Yeah?”

“Mhm,” she nods. “Did you learn anything tonight?”

Harley brightens a bit at that, but then his face falls into a worried frown and he glances at the door. “Yeah, I found out a lot... He’s probably waiting for me though. I-I don’t think it’s a good idea to-to talk ‘bout it now, ‘cause it’s gonna take a while...”

“That’s fine,” Pepper smiled.

“How-um. How do I get up here to see you though without anyone getting suspicious?”

Pepper’s smile was mischievous. “You tell me you little genius. You’ve seen the way Tony works and reacts firsthand. Just think... what gets him tickin’? This is all part of your training, so you better figure it out.”

Harley smiles and nods his head excitedly. “Yeah... I think I’m starting to get an idea.”

“Great, now come give me a hug. I haven’t seen you for a few hours.” She opens her arms to him and Harley shuffles over to give her an awkward hug.

He hated to admit how warm and fuzzy it made him feel, and he most definitely didn’t want to curl up next to her in the bed and hug her all night just like he’d do with his mother when he was younger. He was too old for that now. Almost a man. So, he let go and didn’t dwell on the cold that immediately followed.

Tony was dressed and ready for bed when he came into the room. Harley had been sent down to bed and Tony was just ready to climb into his own bed, kiss his wife a good few times, say goodnight to his daughter, and go to sleep..

“Hey Pep,” he smiled lazily, crawling into his side of the bed. “How’d it go with Peter today?” He propped his elbow up on the bed and leaned his cheek against his palm so he could look at his wife. “Tell me everything about your day.”

Pepper doesn’t say a word as she gently lifts up the covers beside her with a coy grin. Tony stares at the boy beneath the comforter dumbly.

“Is there a reason there’s a child in my bed?” He asked with annoyance laced in his tone. His relaxed pose drops, and Pepper can almost feel him physically stiffen against the mattress as he looks down at the cute child curled up next to his wife.

“He had a really terrible nightmare about his father, and Happy brought him up because he was asking for me” Pepper answered defiantly. “And he’s staying right here. I’m not going to be letting him out of my sight anytime soon after the things he’s told me. If you have a problem with that then you can go make yourself comfortable on the couch.”

Tony fixes her with an annoyed look. He decided to dig deeper into that whole nightmare bit when he wasn’t exhausted and butt-hurt. Then, he looked down at the kid again. He was curled up with his thumb in his mouth and the back of his head pressed close to Pepper’s side. He found himself feeling sympathetic for the boy, but he shook himself out of it. Letting a child sleep in his bed was stepping very close to that line he had drawn as soon as the boy had fallen into his care. Although, at this point he can barely remember what that line was.

“He’s not our child, Pep. He doesn’t need to be sleeping with us. He has his own bed downstairs. He can sleep with Harley if he gets any more nightmares.”

“Tony,” she reprimands with a disappointed glare. She found herself getting irritated, irked, and completely furious with her husband. This was her baby. “He’s a baby.”

“He’s Richard Parker’s baby. Not mine.” Tony responded tersely... he didn’t need to fall any more in love with this boy more than he already has.

“Exactly,” Pepper scolded. “He is Richard Parker’s son, which probably means he hasn’t had a proper hug since his mother died. You know exactly how that man is, and you know better than anyone that that isn’t any way a child should be treated. Peter’s still young and he needs somebody to love him.”

Tony wanted to argue he really did, because he really didn’t want a psychopath’s kid sleeping in his bed, next to his pregnant wife.

“That still doesn’t make him our kid, Pep,” Tony warned, lifting his side of the covers to settle beneath them. Pepper makes a small noise in disagreement, but other than that doesn’t say a word.

She reaches over to turn off the lamp and put down her book as Tony murmured “*Mommy hormones*” under his breath. He inched closer to her on the bed, hyper aware of the tiny child in the space between them, and he reached out a hand to stroke her belly. He leaned down and kissed the fabric of her shirt, whispering a quiet ‘goodnight Maguna’, and then lifting his head to give his wife a proper kiss. “Goodnight Deary. I love you.”

He settled back in his own space and Pepper smiled over at him. Then, for some reason, his hand found itself hovering over Peter’s head. His cheek found the pillow and he watched the boy with just a bit of fascination, letting his hand fall onto the soft mop of wild brown curls, wondering if this is what it would be like for the rest of his life. He let his thumb wander down to smooth across the kid’s forehead, and Peter snuffled, nose scrunching as his entire body moved to nuzzle his hand. Tony fought against the smile and then dropped his hands, mouthing ‘Goodnight Petey’ into the darkness... because that way Pepper wouldn’t be able to see him.

“Think of it as practice Tony.” She whispered through the silence.

So that’s what he did, and if he found the kid leeching to his side the next morning... he didn’t think he’d really care.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! I got this out a lot faster then I thought I would. I hope it's not too OOC. I've been really struggling with Harley and also Tony a bit... anyway this is the beginning of the irondad guys! From here on out Pete and Tony will be an adorable father and son duo! So if y'all have any questions just ask, I'd be happy to answer. And I love hearing from each and every one of you, I get so excited when I see a new message in my inbox :) Please lemme know what you thought. I love you all! Thank you so much for reading and I hope it didn't disappoint!!! :D

Btw jwriter819 gave me the idea for Pete having a nightmare and calling for his Mama but meaning Pepper. All their stories are a-mazing so please go and read them!

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

"Do not confuse a broken person for an evil person. A broken person can be fixed an evil person cannot. An evil person causes pain, and hurts others without remorse or a second thought. They deliberately cause chaos and thrive off of terror. A broken person would never do this, knowing how it feels to be on the other side. Don't confuse someone who can be saved with someone you will need to be saved from."

- Jazz Zo Marcellus (I changed it just a bit tho)

Chapter Notes

^^^

I just really like that quote!

Anyways! I gots lots and lots of flufffff!!! Enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony jolts awake in a sudden panic. His eyes snapped open, blood pounding against his ears and his heart hammering in his chest with no recollection of what had caused it. All he knew was that he couldn't breathe. His lashes fluttered wildly as his eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he rushed to take in a breath which only resulted in a few desperate gasps. Then it hit him... His senses flooded back and he felt a numbing sting in his arm. A hand was wrapped tightly around his left wrist and a heavy weight was laid on his chest. He was trapped...

His immediate instinct was to fight off the stranger or whatever danger it was that had him trapped on his bed. His body shook with anticipation, and his chest spasmed from the harsh movements, but then there was an annoyed little snuffle from beside him and he found himself freezing in place. His eyes snapped downwards, towards the noise and he choked back a startled shout, muffling it in his throat so it sounded more like a strangled scream. He cursed himself, ashamed and embarrassed for panicking over a tiny kid laying across him. It was pathetic.

His left arm was propped up on his chest just as it usually was every night, but this time there was another small arm draped across his front to meet his hand halfway and small little fingers were curled tightly around his wrist in an iron grip. It belonged to Peter; the little boy his wife had insisted on letting sleep with them the previous night. He was tucked beneath his right arm, snug and comfortable in the crevice of his armpit and Tony found himself grumbling ever so slightly.

Soon after he regained his composure he began shifting uncomfortably, unsure of what to do. He grimaced, tugging at his arm to release himself from Peter's grip so he might be able to control his panic that was sadly still enveloping him. It was a weakness that he hated, because not even Pepper was able to grab ahold of his left hand without sending a jolt of panic through his spine. After the third tug, his hand was released, but the tiny fingers didn't seem to be all that fond of it. He watched, horrified, as a low, guttural growl emitted from the boy tucked into his side. His fingers

clenched and unclenched above Tony's abdomen, wriggling like frustrated worms. His face screwed into an angry frown and he shifted, mewling angrily as he fought at the confines of Tony's right arm, which had at some point of the night wrapped around Peter's small form in a protective embrace.

That's when Tony started panicking again. He floundered, tossing his head to the side to look for his wife, only to find her back to him, sleeping soundly beneath the mound of covers that had been tossed onto her side of the bed. Peter kept pushing against him, whining... and Tony didn't understand why he didn't just... let go of him like the boy seemed to want him to do. Instead, he kept his right arm firmly in place, and for some ungodly reason reached his left hand up towards Peter's frustrated fingers.

"Shh," Tony hushed, sacrificing two of his fingers for the boy to grab on to. He didn't know what possessed him to do what he did... he didn't know what stupid paternity obsessed angel overtook his body, because he started patting the boy's bottom softly, just like you'd do with a whiny baby. "Shh," he sighed, mostly to himself as he continued patting the boy's backside gently.

Peter immediately quieted down, reduced to pleased snuffles as he scooted closer. Tony just watched, with only a tiny bit of fascination... because he'd done that. Him. By himself. Without Pepper's help. He calmed down the kid with only a couple fingers and a few butt taps... that was it. He would never admit it out loud, but he was immensely proud of himself.

Then, as if the kid wasn't already crowding his personal space enough, Tony watched as his little leg hooked itself over his hip, effectively pulling himself even closer to his side.

Tony just stared for a couple moments before he found himself unsure of what to do next.

"Pepper," he whispered loudly, turning his head back and forth to look between the woman's outline beneath the comforter and the boy snuggled up next to him, as if he were unsure of where to focus his attention. "Pepper - hey!"

"*What* Tony?" She moaned snappishly. She was always kinda snappy in the morning.

"Look."

He made enough ruckus to suade her into rolling over in bed to look at what was oh so important enough to interrupt her sleep.

Tony gestured at the tiny koala wrapped around his waist and tucked under his arm. Pepper smiled tiredly at him, her gaze lingering on the tiny hand wrapped around two of his fingers. He smiled a bit too...

"I think he likes me Pep," he whispered, awkwardly patting the kid's back.

"I already knew that," Pepper whispered, lifting her hand to cover a small yawn. "He kept asking about you yesterday."

Tony lifts a suspicious eyebrow and glances down at the kid again. "Really? I'd expect him to ask for Happy. I haven't really done anything with him to make him like me."

"Well," Pepper smiled, reaching out her hand to card through the kid's curls. "You were the first one to be nice to him since his mother died. He trusts you." She leans down to nuzzle her face into Peter's mop of hair. "Do you have something important you need to get done today? Peter might

like to spend some time with you-”

He cut her off before she could finish the thought... he didn't- Peter didn't need to be following him around today.

“Yeah, I got something important to finish up.” Tony nods, watching, transfixed, as her fingers wove through the soft looking curls, face pressed close to him without any hesitation or doubt as she lovingly groomed his wild hair. Openly loving the boy with an unending amount of affection. He kinda wished he had the confidence to do that too, though he was sure he'd be able to do it with Morgan once the time came. “Rogers handed over an old CI of his last night. He supposedly has a few more tricks up his sleeve. He's got a mouth on him though... gonna be kinda hard to crack I think.” He tossed his head to look over at her again. “I'm kinda dreading it a little.”

Pepper only hummed without looking at him. “Same guy that kicked Harley last night?”

Tony gulped, only slightly. “Kid tattled on me already, huh?” Pepper simply looked up at him, not amused. “I took care of that last night. He won't be touching another kid anytime soon and Harley won't be going anywhere near him either. Once I get everything I need I'll just go dump his body in a lake somewhere.”

Pepper stared at him for a moment. “The man, right?”

“Of course the man!” Tony retaliated angrily, “who else? You think I'd off Harley? He's a brat, but not that much of a brat.”

Pepper smirked, leaning away from him and Peter. He glares playfully at her. “Whatever. I'm just gonna get done what I can today.”

He sees Pepper's eyebrows crease a bit and he immediately knows what's coming. “Maybe I could come down for a bit and-”

“No, absolutely not,” Tony interjected with a stern frown. “Bruce told you to rest for a reason. Work puts too much stress on you and the baby. You don't need to overwork yourself.”

Pepper narrowed her brows at him dangerously, and he could already see the storm brewing behind her eyes. “I'm starting to think you put him up to all this 'cause you're just paranoid. I can handle myself fine, Tony.”

“I know you can handle yourself fine. What I'm worried about is the precious cargo you're supposed to be lugging around for another couple months.” If he had a free arm he would have reached out to stroke her stomach just to make the point. “I can't risk you getting accidentally hurt, or too stressed out. There's a lot going on right now and I don't want it to overwhelm you. Not again.”

Pepper's face falls and her eyes cast down. “We both know that last time was... it wasn't something you could have controlled Tony.”

“Yes it was!” He snarled, huffing angrily. He felt the small fingers around his twitch in surprise, so he lowered his voice. “Killian kidnapped you 'cause of me. That was my fault. Don't excuse that.”

Pepper's lips pursed. “It's different now, though Tony. Me going downstairs and doing a bit of non strenuous work every once in a while won't effect Morgan. Pregnant women go to work all the

time. It's not dangerous, I promise."

Tony narrows his eyes pointedly. "But what if it is? What if some random psychopath waltzes in pretending to be on our side, but ends up shooting up the place? You could get hurt. What if a riot breaks out? What if-What if you're working in my office and one of my guns go off 'cause I forgot to calibrate it correctly? I can't risk it. It's too dangerous. Our work is dangerous, you know that Pep."

"I'm a big girl, Honey." She retaliates with a frustrated sigh.

"I know, but I'm the Boss. What I say goes. And I say you're grounded until you pop that little thing out of your lady parts." Tony insists sternly.

"Fine," Pepper relents with a roll of her eyes, "but can you at least have JARVIS unlock the normal news channels? I have no idea what's going on out in the world and it's starting to make me feel like Rapunzel."

Tony's face scrunched up with anxiety, and Pepper reached over to smooth out his frown with a small smile.

"I know you're just trying to protect me, but some things you just need to let go of Honey. I'm a grown woman and I don't appreciate being controlled." Tony grit his teeth together. She pulled the 'appreciate' card. *I don't appreciate you being so reckless, Tony. I don't appreciate your tone, Tony. I don't appreciate you ignoring me for days on end, Tony*. He hated the word appreciate.

"Fine, but I'm ordering another check up from Bruce in a week, and if your anxiety has spiked *at all* I'm blocking 'em again."

There was a heavy silence at that, and Tony turned away to avoid Pepper's scrutinizing gaze.

"What is it you're not telling me Tony?" Pepper questioned suspiciously, narrowing her eyes at him.

Before Tony has the chance to think up some ridiculous excuse, the kid next to him started to stir and Tony jolted to attention, staring down at it as if the little body were rigged to blow at the smallest provocation.

"Good morning Peter," Pepper spoke warmly, rubbing a hand down his back.

Tony can see an adorable little smile spread across the kid's face as he wriggles around to nuzzle his face more firmly against the side of Tony's sturdy chest. Tony feels his stomach flutter and the arm Peter was tucked under started to twitch nervously.

"Mm," Peter hummed in answer, "Mornin'." Then he released a cutesy little yawn and scooted closer again. Tony didn't know how it was possible because he had already been leached impossibly close to his side to begin with. His little fists curled tighter around his two fingers and Tony looked back to his face to see he was quickly being pulled back into dreamland.

Nope. Couldn't have that. He had to get up and get some work done before it got too late... there was so much to do. Either Peter had to scooch over and snuggle with Pepper to sleep, or he needed to wake up. Either way, the kid needed to let go of him... and he didn't have the heart to just push him away. Also, Pepper would probably glare at him for a straight week if he did that.

“Hi Peter,” He spoke, just loud enough to be above a whisper. Peter jolted awake at that and stared up at Tony’s face as if he couldn’t quite believe it.

““Ony?” His eyes were wide with wonderment as he stared up at his face. His fist let go of Tony’s fingers, and the man quickly hid his hand at his side before the boy could change his mind. Peter didn’t seem fazed. Instead, a bright smile broke across his face and he reached up to stroke the prickly hair on Tony’s face in a loving gesture. “Hi.”

Tony smiled back. Or at least he tried. He wasn’t sure if it looked more like a smile or more like a grimace. He still wasn’t all that used to interacting with a child.

“Hey. I have to get up to go to work soon. Do you wanna wake up and maybe-”

“I wanna go,” Peter immediately interjected. “Can I come?”

Tony shared a look with Pepper and he found himself floundering for possibly the fifth time that morning. “Uhh. I have some adult work to do, but maybe Harley can hang out with you for awhile. Or you can stay with Pepper again...”

Peter’s face scrunched as if he were seriously pondering what Tony had said. He sat up slowly and kneeled on the mattress with his finger tapping his chin dramatically. His knees pressed into Tony’s side as he hovered above the man with a contemplative frown.

“Do ‘ou have to kill bad person today?” He asked seriously, and, again, Tony found himself at a loss for words.

“Uh-well... um not today I hope.”

The kid was intuitive for his age, that was for sure.

“Oh, okay.” Peter smiled, falling backwards into the soft comforter so his head landed somewhere near Pepper’s hip. Pepper’s smile was warm as she leaned down to press several soft kisses to his face. Soon, his little legs were kicking at Tony’s right arm and his body shook with uncontrolled peals of laughter as Pepper pretended to eat his nose.

“Om Nom Nom! So good!” She exclaimed, followed by Peter’s cheerful shriek.

Tony smiled at the domesticity and threw his legs over the side of the bed to escape the onslaught from Peter’s legs. He made his way around the room, getting ready for the day while Pepper and Peter lounged on the bed beneath a mountain of blankets.

By the time he was dressed and ready, Peter had snuggled up next to Pepper, rubbing her baby belly lovingly and whispering little nothings against her shirt.

“I’m so bery ex’ited to meet ‘ou MooMoo. We will p’ay so much, and Mama an’ Daddy will p’ay too.” He whispered with his cheek resting against the bump. Tony felt a twinge of something in his stomach and he frowned. It was weird... It was weird to hear Richard Parker’s kid refer to him and his wife as Mama and Daddy even though Tony was almost 100% sure the kid didn’t really mean it in that way. He glanced at Pepper’s face and she didn’t seem fazed, so he dismissed the feeling as a simple overreaction.

He walked over and placed a sweet kiss on Pepper’s forehead and lips before straightening back up and smoothing down his crisp white shirt. He turned to look at Peter and the kid was looking up at

him expectantly with a tiny hand raised towards him. Apparently he was finished speaking with Morgan.

“What?” Tony asked incredulously with a slight scoff.

Peter just glared at him indignantly, raising his arm all the more insistently.

Tony looked over at Pepper for some help, but she didn’t offer him any. She just bit down on her bottom lip to hold back her smirk. It took another couple of awkward looks on his part, and irritated scowls on Peter’s part before Pepper decided to pitch in.

“I think he wants a kiss too.” She answered, and just to make sure Tony got the idea, she grabbed Peter by the waist and pulled him closer to pepper the side of his head in several kisses, making obnoxious MWAH noises to accentuate each loving smack of lips. “He loves his kisses!”

“Hmm,” Tony hummed in slight annoyance. Peter maintained sharp eye contact with him through Pepper’s attack though. He seemed pretty dead set on getting a kiss... Not that Tony didn’t want to kiss him and tickle him until he cackled and kicked, squealing and giggling like he was the happiest kid on Earth. He wanted to... but that’s just not something he did. It’s not something Tony Stark would do... Just because he wanted to do something didn’t mean he should... Although, that logic never stopped him before. So, Tony reached out a hand towards the kid, wearing a small grin. He decided to just maybe let loose this one time. It would be good *practice* , right?

Peter eagerly scrambled away from Pepper with his hand held out to grab onto the man’s. He giggled manically in anticipation and Tony couldn’t hold back the smirk any longer. He grabbed the little boy by the waist and tugged him forward with a playful growl. The boy squealed in delight and Tony pressed a big sloppy kiss to his cheek, then another, and another, because he just couldn’t resist it anymore. Peter laughed and laughed and it was quite possibly the best sound he’d ever heard.

Peter pushed at his cheek, attempting to scramble away from the ticklish feeling of the man’s prickly beard scraping along his face.

“Is that what you wanted?” Tony teased huffily, accentuating it with another kiss to his jaw. He wriggled his fingers against the boy’s side and Peter shrieked through his hyperactive giggles. Tony tossed him on the mattress and leaned over him to hold him down as he blew a raspberry on his cheek.

Peter kicked at his chest, shrieking with laughter and Tony found himself chuckling giddily along with him. He placed one more kiss onto the tip of Peter’s nose before pushing himself off the bed and straightening his tie. He was slightly out of breath, but he didn’t care. Peter’s starry grin and cute little giggles from the aftershock were worth it.

“Alright,” he sighed with a small smile, “well, that was fun.” He winked playfully at Pepper and leaned over to give her another goodbye kiss. “Love you hon. Be good for Pep, Pete.” He straightened the collar of his jacket and glanced back to see Pete happily waving goodbye at him. He smiled back at the kid as he smoothed back his hair and left the room.

Tony was on his way to greet the new guest they’d acquired last night when he was intercepted by Harley on the common floor. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously as the boy slowly slinked up towards him, casting worried glances towards the young men around them. Tony heard a select few snickering, and he frowned... but then he spotted the disassembled TV remote on the large

coffee table.

“You butcher the new remote already, kid?” Tony chuckled. Harley rolled his eyes and casted his head so it was bowed.

“Yeah, it had something I needed... Happy wasn’t too, well, *happy* ... but um, Boss?” He started tentatively, an arm wrapped protectively around his middle. Tony narrowed his eyes again, taking in the boy’s odd posture.

“What’s up kid?”

Harley leaned in a little closer, casting his gaze around at the other men, and few women, that were lounging around in the common area. Two of them were already getting at piecing together the guts of the TV remote on the table “I-I-I don’t wanna make a big deal, but um... you remember when that guy kicked me last night?”

Tony nodded and immediately reached out to grab onto his shoulder. Then his hand lifted to cup the side of his neck, thumb resting on the line of the kid’s jaw to force the kid’s head up to look at him... thankfully Harley didn’t fight against the contact.

“What’s wrong?” Tony asked seriously.

“I think I, like, got really hurt or something... “ at the word ‘hurt’ Tony was already dragging the boy along with him, veering off of his path towards Sam Wilson’s newly appointed room, and back to the elevator, but Harley kept rambling on. “I-I didn’t even notice anything different until I saw the *huge* bruise this morning. It really doesn’t even hurt that bad, but I just thought you should know, ‘cause I don’t know if I can spar with Happy today... and I didn’t, like, want to bleed out from internal damage or something like that.”

“You’re not going to spar with anyone for a good week.” Tony insisted a bit angrily. His teeth snapped together in irritation, and his grip on the kid’s shoulder didn’t loosen.

“Are you mad? You seem like you’re mad.” Harley questioned with a slight quirk to his brow. Tony was happy to see no fear in his eyes as he asked the question.

“I’m pissed that I didn’t hit that bastard hard enough. Why didn’t you inform Happy? He’s supposed to be your supervisor. He’s supposed to be taking care of you.”

Harley paused and Tony saw something similar to panic flicker across his face. Then, his cheeks reddened slightly before he started stammering out an excuse, “I... he was busy with the older trainees.... Where are we going?” Harley glanced up at the climbing numbers hopefully.

“To the penthouse,” Tony answered offhandedly. “JARVIS, have Dr. Banner meet us in the penthouse. I want him to check up on Harley.”

“Right away Sir,” JARVIS responded in kind.

“Great.” Then Tony turns to look at him, but he doesn’t say a word.

Tony set up Harley on the couch while Peter and Pepper peak in at them curiously, messing with breakfast in the kitchen... Peter was standing on a chair so he could help stir the pancake batter. Pepper watched in slight amusement as Tony fussed over the kid, and when she caught Harley’s eye, she offered him a small wink. Then the elevator doors opened and Bruce Banner walked out

with a bag in his hand.

“Hey Bruce. Thanks for coming so early, I know you like to sleep,” Tony joked with a small smirk. “I need you to check the kid’s ribs. He was complaining about this morning. Check his head too. It looked like he hit it pretty hard when he landed last night.”

Bruce nodded, adjusting the glasses on his nose as he approached them. Tony clapped him on the shoulder then turned to Harley.

“Alright, Bruce’ll take good care of ya. I need to go beat up the jerk that did this some more.” Then Tony turns to address the two other adults in the room. “Have JARVIS give me a report on him. If he’s allowed to be up and moving around he’s more than welcome to come see me after I’ve finished with Wilson. If not, I want him to stay up here and relax until he’s healed. Understood?”

Bruce offered him an exasperated smile and nodded his head.

“I wanna come see ‘ou too!” Peter shouted from the kitchen, waving his hand frantically to get the man’s attention.

“Maybe later kid,” Tony answered. Peter pouted, then lifted his other hand to join the first one as if asking to be picked up. “Kiss?”

Tony’s frown tightened at the soft longing in his little-boy voice, and he found himself answering in the same way.

“Maybe later kid.”

“Now are you willing to talk?” Tony questioned earnestly, shaking out his hand as he looked down at the bloodied man. The only response was a glob of blood being spat out onto his shoes.

“Screw you man,” He groaned, glaring up at Tony.

Tony just couldn’t help himself. A sharp right hook sent the man’s head to the left, and a left snapped it to the right. At this point, he felt that his go-to interrogation methods wouldn’t be getting him anywhere. The guy was tough, he’d give him that. So he grabbed the man’s bruised jaw between his hand and squeezed just before the point he knew he would hear telltale snap, and he tried one last time. “Tell me what you know about Oscorp.”

“Why the hell would I tell you?” The man choked out, staring up at him with blood shot eyes, threatening to close at any moment. And then he had the audacity to laugh. “Where’s all your fancy torturin’ tools, hm? I’ve heard great things ‘bout you Stark. So far I’m not so impressed.” He grinned to show off the pearly whites that had been saturated in a dark, sheeming red... a few new teeth were missing too. Tony released him with a harsh shove.

Tony had to admire his resilience and he fell back into the chair across from the man.

“I don’t usually pull ‘em out till I need to,” he shrugged his shoulder, offering the man an amused grin of his own. “Most guys’ll give in after the second punch and I don’t really like dirtying my equipment for no reason.” Tony rolled his eyes as if he was honest to goodness frustrated with the thought. “I hate it, ‘cause then Happy or Allen will complain and argue about who’s turn it is to wash the stuff,” he sighed, “it’s such a pain.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, but the eye beneath it was swollen shut. “You’re worried about *cleaning* your torture stuff?” He scoffed, a few spittles of red escaping his lips.

Tony scoffed right back. “Of course. I’m not an *animal*. I don’t like it when infection beats me to the most satisfying part.” His grin spread to each corner of his face, eyebrows narrowed to accentuate the wickedness of his smile.

“You’re a bastard,” Sam groaned, slumping in his chair heavily.

“I am, but everyone already knows that. But what I wanna know is why *you* are so against me?” Tony questioned curiously. His eyes glinted in amusement as he crossed one leg over the other.

“You’re a heartless killer. And it makes me sick,” He spat. “You torture innocent people and call it *justice*.” He spat out the word as if it had wronged him in some way... and in a way it had, judging by the situation he was in right then. “You’re no better than the people you claim you’re protecting the world against.”

Tony leaned closer and raised his brow. He was quick to correct the man with one simple statement. “I only kill when they deserve it.”

“Oh please! Keep telling yourself that. You killed a detective in cold-blood. Everyone knows it was you,” Sam accused, despite the fact that his eyes were rolling into the back of his head.

“Oh yes, I remember that one. He definitely deserved that. He had blood on his hands. Two innocent young boys and an older woman.” Tony shrugged with a small grin, tscking patronizingly.

That didn’t seem to deter Sam. It only made him angrier.

“You killed a school teacher! His body was sliced up as if you had decided to paint his skin using a knife.” Sam just seemed to get himself more and more worked up.

“Pedophile. Two little girls. Eight and Nine. They told me themselves when they spotted me on the street. They knew I’d help them.”

Sam threw himself against the restraints, glaring as if that would help make his point.

“A LAWYER!”

“Abused his wife. Couldn’t let ‘im get away with that, could I?” Tony shrugged nonchalantly.

“You’ve kidnapped two kids,” he snarled. “They’re missing, but I know it was you.”

“Oh you do now?” Tony laughed. “Please enlighten me.”

“I saw the first one last night,” Sam grinned, thinking he finally caught a genuine misdeed on Tony’s part. “The other’s Richard Parker’s kid. Everyone knows you took him.”

“I did actually,” Tony admitted with a reminiscent smile. “Well, technically Romanoff did, but I kept him. Saw him this morning actually. The kid’s absolutely precious, Pepper loves him, and boy,” he blew out a low whistle, “that kid loves his hugs and kisses. No wonder he likes Pep so much... she indulges the kid at every waking moment.”

“You still kidnapped ‘im,” Sam insisted.

Tony furrowed his eyebrows softly. "I think of it more like "saving" him. He deserves a better father than what life handed to him. You of all people should know the terrible things Richard Parker's done. Don't for a second think that Peter hasn't suffered at his hands at some point."

Sam didn't seem to have anything more to share with him. So, Tony leaned in further and narrowed his eyes. "What is it really? You've helped men worse than what you seem to think I am."

"I don't help Nazis," the man spat, baring his bloody teeth with hate fueled eyes. Just like a true American patriot.

Tony laughed outright at that. "Buddy you think we're Hydra?"

Sam Wilson's scowl falters for only a second and Tony finally understands.

"Yeah, no, if we were Hydra, you'd be turned inside out by now. I've still got a little bit of humanity left inside me."

"That's bull," the man spat, "I know who you really are Stark. I've seen the news. Everyone has. You're a leader of Hydra; the President says you need to be killed. You're a wanted man here and all across Europe.."

Tony leaned forward so his elbows were braced against his knees. That was a bit of a sour topic... he didn't really appreciate being called a Hydra leader all that much, but, hey, what can you do when the President of the United States is out for your head? Politicians will say anything to get what they want, that's been proven true time and time again. Tony just doesn't understand why anyone trusts what any man in power says anymore. Everyone's just naive these days.

"I didn't realize we were playing two truths one lie..." The man didn't respond, so Tony continued. "You can't believe everything you see on the news, especially when President Ross is a biased idiot. I honestly wouldn't be surprised if he were paying off Hydra on the downlow so they won't kill him... Listen, we're not Hydra, we're not Shield. I'm just a very angry man trying to fix the mess the idiots of the world have created."

Wilson's harsh glare didn't falter. "Why do you need information on Oscorp then?"

Tony narrowed his eyes. "I'm out for Richard Parker. Personal vendetta you could say. Now onto what you said... Is Hydra correlated with Oscorp. Are they collaborating? Is that why you were so hesitant to share what you know?"

Sam visibly grit his teeth.

"I've known about the Hydra infestation in Shield for a while now. I didn't know how deep it ran... All I know is that they're planning something big, and Oscorp is a part of that plan."

Tony's eyes narrowed dangerously. He finally saw what he was looking for in Sam's eyes; a good man. Wilson was a good man despite the poor situations he'd found himself in over the years. Wilson was beginning to trust him... for now at least.

He stood from the chair. He approached the door and threw it open.

"Get this man out of these restraints. Get him some food, water, and a place to rest. Don't let anyone lay a hand on him until I give the say so." He turns back to Sam. "If Oscorp is part of this then the Hydra infestation runs a lot deeper than we thought."

If Oscorp is really Hydra... then he's lost any excuse to say Stane wasn't.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading guys!!! I really appreciate all your support! I love you all so much! Lemme know what you think!!

Sidenote: I've edited the first chapter quite a bit if you ever get bored. There's lots of foreshadowing and stuff... so yeah.

Love you! See you soon!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This chapter is fairly Harley-centric, but there is plenty of Peter in it too.

...I just wanted to give Harley a bit of background and character development before I dove straight into some more plot and ironclad fluffiness.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Bruce frowned as his hands grazed over the well-sized bruise sweeping across Harley's torso. It wasn't anything major, but it definitely wasn't something easy to look at. The large swelling accompanied by the few scars or yet to be healed gashes and bruises did not paint a pretty picture and Bruce found himself getting angry beneath the calm, unwavering facade he's spent years practicing.

"The damage isn't too bad," he mused quietly, gritting his teeth together to keep his voice calm and steady so he wouldn't panic the boy, "but another blow like this might end up breaking a rib or two. Be careful next time kid." Bruce let his shirt drop and he lifted his hand to pat Harley on the shoulder, wearing a strained smile. Harley tried his best to smile back, but it came across as more of an embarrassed grimace.

Bruce cleared his throat and backed away, lifting a hand to push his glasses further up his nose. "I'll-um. I'll let Tony know you're on your way down, yeah?"

Harley found himself on the verge of a panic, opening his mouth to offer what was sure to be an arguable excuse, because... well, he hadn't quite planned it out this far. Thankfully Pepper was there to save the day and jump in before he could start fumbling over nonsensical words. "Actually Bruce, I was hoping Harley would stay up here to have breakfast with me and Peter. I'll send him back down to Tony when we're done."

The man didn't think anything of it. In fact, he fought to restrain the wide smile that threatened to break out across his face. "I'm sure Harley will enjoy that." Bruce turned to smile down at him and again Harley returned the smile with an awkward grimace. "Well-um. Have fun. I'll have JARVIS send Tony the diagnosis."

"Okay Bruce," Pepper smiled brightly as she busied herself in setting out three places at the dining table. "Take care."

"You too Pepper. Try and stay off your feet please." Bruce offered with one last wave before

stepping onto the elevator.

As soon as he was gone, Harley lept from the couch, releasing the breath of air he had been pretty much holding ever since he even began contemplating the idea of complaining about his tiny little bruise to Tony to sidle his way up into the man's penthouse to see Pepper.

He rushed towards the dining room where Pepper was now busy situating Peter on top of a pile of books so he could reach the food at his spot on the table.

"Pretty smart, right?" Harley bragged with a proud smile. "I didn't even think it would work."

Pepper hid an amused smile of her own by biting her lip. She cut Peter's syrup soaked pancakes into small squares as the younger boy gazed up at Harley with two fingers hanging from his mouth, and wide, curious eyes.

"Wha' work?" He questioned and Harley snapped his mouth shut before he started stammering like a fool.

"It's nothing sweetie to worry about sweetie. Harley just wanted to come up and visit with us. Now eat your pancakes."

That didn't seem to appease the boy in the least. His previous neutral, babyish expression fell into a frustrated pout as his fingers fell from his mouth and his eyebrows drew down in irritation. "Bu-bu-bu-" he protested indignantly.

"Eat your pancakes Peter," Pepper instructed firmly. She gave him a small look and Peter backed down.

"Kay," The boy huffed, reaching out to grab onto one of the soggy pancake pieces with his fingers and shove it in his mouth.

"Harley, honey, why don't you sit down and eat," Pepper offered with a smile. "Then we can talk for a little while."

And that's exactly what they did, Pepper served him the most delicious pancakes he had ever eaten in his entire life. She spoke softly with both him and Peter as she ate her own plate of food at the head of the table. Peter and Harley sat on either side of her, across from each other. Peter eagerly

answered all of Pepper's questions, babbling on long after the question was answered, and even though Harley refrained from talking much, he couldn't really help finding enjoyment in the shared meal and light conversation. It reminded him of when his mother and sister were still alive, and how lively the house would be when they were all at home.

"I doh see Tony now?" Peter eventually asked as he pushed his empty plate away from himself definitively. Harley watched, looking between Pepper and Peter to gauge her response and prepare for a few potential tears. Tony had practically said "no" earlier, which hadn't seemed to be up to debate... and Harley never liked seeing Peter upset because the boy reminded him so much of his little sister... So, the next things coming out of Pepper's mouth took him a bit by surprise. But then again, Pepper seemed to be more in charge than Tony was half the time... or so he's heard.

"Why don't I get you cleaned up. Then you can go play while Harley and I talk, and then I'm sure Harley won't mind taking you down to see Tony, okay?"

Peter nodded fervently, scrambling to get out of the chair. Pepper offered Harley an apologetic smile and moved slowly to follow the excited toddler towards the bathroom. "I'll be right back Harley and then we can talk."

So, there Harley sat. At an empty dining table, picking at his last scraps of food. The abrupt change from lively to quiet had his stomach somersaulting and all of a sudden the breakfast didn't taste quite as appetizing as it had. His hidden smile dropped into an irritated scowl and he pushed the food away with enough force to send it slamming into Peter's own discarded plate. The scene was all too familiar. A home, lived in and loved, yet oddly quiet, and he couldn't find it in himself to finish the meal. All he could see was the tiny pinprick of blood trailing down his mother's forehead as her cold body sat up limply against the chair at the head of the table with her eyes wide open and an untouched breakfast of eggs and bacon set in front of her as his sister lie beside her. Complete silence besides the sharp ringing in his ears. He dreaded the uneasy quiet... then again, he dreaded the noise. Sometimes there was too much screaming and all he could feel was the bile driving up his throat with the urge to pound on a locked door to just "*please-please just stop. Just please Leave her alone!*" But the screaming always continued even in the dead silence of the night... because the silence was always the loudest.

"Is everything alright Mr. Keener?" JARVIS spoke up from the ceiling. Harley's head snapped upwards, eyes wide with surprise as he shook himself from his stupor... he hadn't thought about that in months... he didn't know what was bringing it all back now of all times. Now, when he actually feels safe and maybe just a little happy.

"Everything's fine. I'm just full." Harley retorted snappishly, pushing the chair away from the table so he could escape the encompassing loneliness lingering in the room... the chair scraped loudly against the tiled floor but he didn't care. He hadn't been completely alone since Oscorp... Happy, Allen, Rhodey, or even Tony were always there...

“Young sir, your heart rate has spiked significantly. Would you like me to alert Mrs. Stark of your distress?”

“No!” Harley demanded. The last thing he needed was for Pepper Stark to think of him as some baby that couldn’t handle being alone. He could be alone for the rest of his life and he wouldn’t give a damn! He was fine! It was just a stupid little-kiddy fear and he gritted his teeth in frustration at the thought.

“What about Mr. Stark? He was fairly adamant about being informed of your wellbeing.”

“I’m fine JARVIS!” Harley shouted angrily, he stormed out of the room, headed straight for the couches.

“Whatever you say Mr. Keener,” JARVIS responded, voice lowering to take on a more monotonous tone, as if Harley had somehow hurt his feelings.

Harley scoffed at the thought. JARVIS was a computer. *It* was a computer. It didn’t have feelings and even if he did, Harley couldn’t care less. He collapsed on the couch, cradling his head in his hands. He doesn’t know what’s wrong, why his nerves are so spiked, why he feels like he’s going to spontaneously implode at any given second...

“Harley? Is everything okay?”

No. Nothing is ever okay. Not anymore

His head snaps up in surprise. Pepper was walking into the room with Peter in her arms. She looked worried, and Harley was quick to throw on an enthusiastic smile for her. He was supposed to be tough... He was going to be a con man, a master of manipulation... just like Pepper. No one was ever allowed to know what he was thinking. He was supposed to be in control...

“Everything’s great! Thank you for breakfast. I’m sorry that I couldn’t finish it all. I’ve never been a big eater first thing in the morning.”

Harley watched as Pepper smiled softly with a small flicker of uncertainty in the way her body twitched away to avoid unneeded eye contact with him. She lowered Peter to the ground where a small pile of toys lay close by and kissed him softly on the forehead as an unobtrusive dismissal to

go and play by himself. By then, her hesitant expression had been schooled and her happy, mothering facade was once more in place. She approached the couch and took a seat a few places away from him, reaching out to squeeze his hand to relay encouragement.

“That’s alright,” she smiled softly, releasing his hand to shuffle against the cushions to settle more comfortably against them. “Why don’t you tell me what you picked up last night. Let’s see how your first night went on-”

“We goin’ see Tony soon?” Peter whined loudly, something short of an angered shout.

“Peter don’t interrupt. That’s not nice.” Pepper instructed firmly. “If you have something important to say while someone else is talking, you say ‘excuse me’.” The little boy’s mouth dropped open in agape confusion and he cocked his head to the side as he stared at her.

Harley found it funny, and it helped ease the troubled stirring in his gut so it settled somewhere between ‘nuisance’ and ‘pain in the ass’. It eased the worry that had slowly began to creep into his bones ever since his arrival, because he realized that this right here; this unfamiliar domesticity was *okay*. It was normal, it was safe, and he was *okay*. Peter was okay. Everything was finally okay now. Tony and Pepper. Rhodey and Happy. Allen and the guys. They were all okay. They were safe. There was nothing to worry about. Not anymore.

“Ex-escuse me?” Peter tried timidly, a worried crease between his brows, voice laced with uncertainty instead of the earlier excitement and assertfulness.

“What’s your question Peter?” Pepper smiled encouragingly, urging him to continue with his inquiries.

“Escuse me we goin’ see Tony soon?” He asked again in one long spiel without pause, though this time his head bowed shamefully as his fingers brushed gently along the small toys surrounding him.

Pepper nodded her head. “Yes, you can go see Tony soon, but you have to be patient, okay?”

“Kay,” Peter responded easily, turning back to the large Duplo blocks Pepper had ordered for him after she learned every man in this godforsaken tower was too dense to think to buy the precious child any toys, or books, or *anything* beyond clothes and a bed.

She turned back to look at Harley and Harley let out an amused huff as he watched Peter for a couple more moments. He was glad Peter had Pepper and Tony... Then he turned to meet Pepper's gaze and all of a sudden he found himself growing nervous once more.

What if he hadn't done a good job? It wasn't like he learned any huge secrets beyond what Pepper already knew. What if she had super huge expectations and when he didn't live up, she'd tell Tony he wasn't worth the time and effort... *Oh gosh* ... and then Tony would just drop him off on the streets again to get nabbed up by evil Oscorp goons. Or worse... Hydra. And then-and then they're gonna end up torturing him for information... and then he's gonna break and rat out all of Tony's secrets and-and-and... he'd end up betraying the only man he'd ever trusted... and *oh god* This isn't good.

"Um-Um well he talked a lot with Steve last night. They talked about Ross' kill order and how Hy-"

"Wait," Pepper interrupted with a quirked brow. "Kill order? What about the kill order?"

Harley frowned at her. *How did Pepper not know about the kill order out for her own husband?* Or maybe this was still part of the whole pretend scheme. "Yeah... the kill order on Tony..." He watched her closely for any small thing she might give away in her expression. "They're accusing him of being a leader of Hydra."

Pepper's expression doesn't change. Her face remained firmly blank and that only seemed to feed Harley's growing nerves until he finds himself fumbling for what to say next. He needed to be *perfect*. He can't mess up.

"Okay... that's good," Pepper hesitantly praised. "But, for this I want you to go into more depth about what's going on," she instructed. "Pretend I know nothing about anything. You need to give me *all* the facts you know. Some things that may seem to be common knowledge to you or the people you associate with may not be known by *me*. Understand?"

Harley nodded. "Yes ma'am. Um... there's been a kill order on Tony for, like, a couple weeks or so. It wasn't long after Shield was announced as Hydra and since Tony and the Stark Family are kinda closely tied to Shield the government assumes that Tony had something to do with the takeover... Y'know, since Howard Stark helped "defeat" Hydra after Shield broke away from him, and then Shield turned out to be Hydra all along... It's just too big of a coincidence I guess is what they're thinking. Steve seems hesitant about it, because word's getting 'round and Hydra's apparently hunting Tony too and there's no way to know who's Hydra and who's not since they haven't all come out yet... somethin' to do with Stane conspiring with Ross and Oscorp. All I know is that Tony really, really doesn't like Oscorp right now. He has some crazy conspiracy that they're planning to take over the world... honestly, I think he's reading into it a bit much, but who

knows,” he shrugs his shoulders, “he knows more about this stuff than I do.”

Pepper nods along quietly.

“Um-um. Apparently the people around New York though are mad ‘cause they don’t think Tony’s Hydra. They *know* he’s not actually... I’m not really sure what it was they were referring to ‘cause they were being real vague ‘bout it, but I’m pretty sure that Tony thinks Ross is dealin’ dirty with Hydra so they don’t kill him or somethin’. Rogers is supposed to look into it further. They talked about um-um bugging Ross’ phone and a couple other leaders of the UN in Europe and Asia too. I think it was um-um a dude in China, Russia, and Italy. I don’t really remember their names though... apparently Tony’s got some guys out there somewhere and he’s wanting them to work on recruiting on the down-low. And-and Rogers is supposed to send out the twins to local gangs to find Hydra guys or even some potential new guys that could help with some bigger plan he’s got going on... He didn’t really talk about that bit too much... I don’t know if it was ‘cause of me or Rogers.”

He paused and looked up at Pepper to make sure he was on the right track, but, again, her face remained blank.

“Okay, that’s actually very good Honey. Now I need you to dig a bit deeper, okay? Why does Tony think Oscorp has the intention to ‘*take over the world*’? How did Hydra break through Shield? Is Ross acting out as a lackeye of Hydra?”

Harley found himself floundering once more. He didn’t know the answer to that stuff! “I-I-I don’t know... they didn’t really talk about all that ‘cause- ‘cause it’s all in the news and-and all assumptions I guess. Tony just told Rogers what he wanted him to do, and Rogers tried telling him to stop killing people so that Ross won’t get suspicious of him, but then Tony got pissed. Then-then they started talking ‘bout Coulson and-and I don’t even know who that is, but apparently it’s this crazy thing because he’s not dead anymore. Then he pulled out Sam from the back of the car and-and Tony was gonna talk to him this morning. That’s all I got. I-I can get more I swear!”

Pepper reached out to lay a hand on his shoulder and Harley felt a bit relieved to see that her smile had returned and replaced the stoic, emotionless frown that had settled on her face through the duration of his top-secret ‘information spilling’ session.

“Don’t worry Honey. You did so good for your first time. I’m so proud, and I’m sure Tony would be too if he knew.”

Harley smiled.

“Tony, Tony, Tony, Tony, Tonnnnnnyyy,” Peter sang loudly as he and Harley rode down in the elevator.

“Gosh dude,” Harley groaned, “just chill. You saw him this morning”

“We donna doh dee Tony!” Peter announced excitedly, bouncing against Harley’s hip. “I misst him so mush!” Harley sighed in annoyance and rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Yes, we *are* going to go see Tony,” He enunciated. Peter had always had trouble speaking. Heck, Harley’s heard him talk more in the past few days than the whole year he had spent with him back at Oscorp. Harley blamed it on Richard, ‘cause it’s not like the man ever spoke to Peter when he wasn’t yelling, and he sure as hell didn’t let Peter speak freely (“WOULD YOU JUST SHUT UP FOR ONCE IN YOUR GODDAMN LIFE?! AND QUIT YOUR WHINING! I SHOULD HAVE MADE YOUR MOTHER ABORT YOU WHEN I HAD THE CHANCE YOU UNGRATEFUL BRAT!”)... Harley really, really hated that man. He reminded him too much of his own father.

“Tony!” Peter shouted out again in celebration, throwing his arms in the air to accompany his happy shrieks of laughter. That’s the moment when the elevator doors decided to open up, depositing Harley and his handful of Peter onto the main floor where JARVIS said Tony was. Thankfully, most of the guys were out and about for the day; gone doing business for Happy or Tony, or something else that Harley never gets included in... Allen’s there though... along with a few other guys that he wasn’t quite familiar with yet.

“Hey Sprout,” Allen greeted with a big, teasing grin. Harley rolled his eyes, “looks like you’re babysittin’ the Little Dude. Wassup Peter?”

“Hi!” Peter greeted enthusiastically. “We aw gonna doh see Tony! We so e’cited! Right Ha’ley?”

“Oh really?” Allen gasped dramatically. Harley scowled at him. “He’s gonna be so excited to see you!”

A couple of the guys hanging around that Harley didn’t know too well started snickering in the

background. He'd only seen them around, never spoke to either of them before. So, he straightened his back and glared at them to try and establish some form of respect like Tony had vaguely taught him the day before, but that just made them laugh harder.

His anxiety spiked again, something that just seemed to be happening today for some reason, and he took a step back to give a wide berth between him and Peter and the teasing that was bound to get him riled up. He felt attacked for some reason, and his skin prickled with the sudden sensation of vulnerability.

"Yo Allen!" One called out through their domineering laughter. "When'd Boss get the two little tagalongs? He goin' soft already?"

"Shut up!" Harley sneered. He wasn't just some little tag along without a purpose... it felt oddly familiar to the way the younger guys at Oscorp would push him around before an inevitable pummeling. Or the way bullies at school would corner him in the courtyards when he was younger just to state their dominance with a few well placed punches to the gut.

"Whatcha gonna do if I don't Sprout? Gonna go cry to your new Daddy? Tell him all 'bout how mean we were to his wittle baby?" That just drew out more laughter.

He wasn't a baby! Tony wasn't his Dad! He was his Boss! And just because he was younger than all the rest of them DIDN'T MEAN HE WASN'T WORTH ANYTHING! He didn't know why he felt so worked up... Allen teased him all the time, but not like this. It was different with these two. It wasn't poking fun, it was downright degradation to form dominance. Harley would know... he'd experienced it firsthand multiple times and he wasn't about to let it happen again. Not here. Not in the place he had just started to view as safe.

"Shut up you assholes!"

"Oooh. You kiss your Daddy with that mouth?"

There was another loud roar of laughter that followed, and Harley grit his teeth together, hoping the uncomfortable thrum pulsating in his mouth would distract him. He felt his eyes burn, but he refused to cry in front of the bastards because he wasn't a stupid baby. He watched as Allen slowly approached him with an apologetic grimace. He took Peter from Harley's arms and all it did was make Harley feel even more exposed without the grounding weight at his hip.

“Ha’ley?” Peter questioned worriedly, leaning away from Allen’s hold to reach out towards Harley.
“You kay?”

Harley didn’t respond. His face furrowed in frustration and his hands formed into tight fists.

“Alright Asher, that’s enough.” Allen placated, bouncing Peter in his arm as he reached out to place his other hand on Harley’s shoulder.

“Aw, c’mon Allen. We’re just havin’ some fun. Right Baby Boss?” Asher teased, laughing outright when he got a look at Harley’s face. The smile that spread across the man’s face was anything but fun and light, and Harley couldn’t hold it back any longer. Fight or Flight... but he was never really one to run away.

“Shut up!” He screamed, heart pounding erratically against his chest as his muscles spasmed in anticipation. He lunged forward towards the large man like the idiotic, emotionally-unstable teenager he was. He rammed straight into Asher’s waist, being sure to nail him right in the gut to knock the breath out of him like Happy had been trying to teach him the day before. It sent them both flying backwards into the ground, and before either of them knew it, Harley was on top of him. He straddled the man’s waist and rained down hits onto the man’s face. “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” He screamed, ignoring the frantic shouts around him. His heart pounded and his breathing was labored because for some reason the panic from earlier was confined into a dense ball in the pit of his stomach and all he could remember were those countless beatings all throughout his life and he just couldn’t... he just couldn’t let himself feel vulnerable to it.

He felt mad. He was just so mad. Asher wasn’t fighting back. He wasn’t throwing a single punch and that just made him even angrier. He heard the shouts around him and he felt the hands trying to pull him away, but he was just *so* angry. He wouldn’t fight back! He was supposed to fight back!

“*Don’t hit him! Don’t hit him!*” That’s what Harley heard on repeat behind the sound of pained grunts and the loud contact of bone against bone... but he knew that the words weren’t meant for him.

“Harley!” That was Allen. It was muffled against all the other noise and the harsh screaming in his ears as the blood rushed through his head like crashing waves against his skull. “Harley get off him!”

Then there was more screaming. High pitched wails, and gut wrenching sobs. A sound too familiar; a sound he’d heard countless times accompanied by feelings of utter dread and helplessness from years ago. It sent more of a spike into his panic because “*not again-not again*”. It couldn’t

possibly be happening again. So he just hit harder, water gushing from the corners of his eyes as the loud screams spurred him on into his panicked assault. It was absolute chaos... but Harley still didn't get off the man. Not until he heard the loud reverberation of a familiar, commanding voice.

“Hey!”

Harley found himself involuntarily freezing, blood running cold and bile rising up his throat from the inkling of unbridled panic and fear. He couldn't seem to find any air, and the next thing he knew he was shoved off Asher's waist by harsh hands. He skidded across the hard ground, frozen in place with wide eyes and stuttering breaths as he stared up at the profile of the angry man in the distance. He was *so* dead.

“What the hell is going on here?” The voice was followed by loud, booming footsteps as he came closer and Harley would have ran if he wasn't still fighting off the panic.

“He-he attacked me!” Asher spluttered, scrambling up off the floor. The men standing around them that had gathered all voiced their agreements and Harley curled in on himself when he heard the undeniable angered growl that escaped from Tony's throat.

“Harley! Get off the floor.”

Harley spluttered, choking on the air as a rough hand grabbed onto his bicep and helped him off the cold floor. He didn't know what to do... he'd pissed Tony off. *Oh god no. Please no. Not again.*

He found himself shaking, and he would have keeled over if it wasn't for Allen catching him after he had just handed off a hysterical Peter over to Tony.

“Allen,” Harley breathed out in a whisper, casting an anxious glance towards the genius a few feet away, busy consoling the sobbing child. “I can't.” He gulped. “I-I-I'm sorry. I don't know why. I-I didn't mean to I swear it. Don't let him hurt me. Please...”

Allen only responded with a reassuring, but pained smile and a hand on top of his head.

Harley didn't find that reassuring at all. He grasped onto the man's jacket desperately. “Where's Happy? Rhodey? Don't let him hurt me. I didn't mean it. I won't do it again. I'll be better. I

promise.” He couldn’t breathe again... which was a problem. He looked like a fool. The snickering from earlier had stopped, and Harley didn’t know which was worse. The pitied silence or the loud taunts.

“You okay, kid?” Asher asked with genuine worry etched into his now bloody, disfigured features. He rested a hand on Harley’s back and Harley scrambled away as if he had been burned by the touch.

“I’m sorry-I’m sorry-i’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry.”

Harley backed away from the group of worried men. They towered over him. They were a threat. They were loyal to Tony. They would do anything Tony asked... *Oh god no* . Not again. He messed up. Again. He messed up again.

“Hey Boss,” Allen called out without ever breaking his worried gaze away from Harley. “I think the kid’s having a panic attack or something.”

That statement in itself was enough to send Harley into another frenzied panic. Then, what felt like seconds later, he felt two, warm, strong hands cradle either side of his head, thumbs brushing against his cheekbones to clear away the tears that had fallen.

“Hey-hey, Buddy, look at me.” Tony instructed sternly, eyes narrowed seriously, and forehead puckered with worry.

Harley’s felt his entire body shudder as if he had been struck with a sudden onslaught of cold air, but he looked up at the man anyway... he couldn't risk pissing him off any more than he already has. Not when he’s already messed up so badly. His mouth opened to repeat the mantra of ‘I’m sorry’s’, but nothing more than several desperate gasps and pained whines escape.

“Hey-hey-hey,” Tony adjusted his grip as he stared down at the boy worriedly. “I need you to breathe for me, okay? Listen to me. In and out. In and out.”

Harley coughs and stumbles as he tries desperately to follow instructions. He gasps, straining to catch a breath of air as Tony had instructed him to do.

Then Tony lets go of him, and Harley isn't sure if the action makes it better or worse. The comforting, yet demanding and powerful presence of Tony as gone... and-and well... he didn't know how to feel.

"Give me the kid," Tony growls at Allen, arms thrust forward to take Peter from him when he had tossed the boy over during his rush to assist Harley. His voice lowers threateningly as he fixes each of the men with a harsh glare. Peter tucks into his shoulder with a soft mewl, and Tony's sure that puts a damper on the menacing demeanor he's trying to project. "I want a full report of what happened here from each one of you. Am I understood? Every single one of you know that this has never been and never will be allowed." He glares pointedly at Asher and growled low and deep enough that the rumbling in his throat would have scratched it dry if he had continued any longer. "And you better be glad that you didn't lay a hand on that boy as far as I could see, because if I find out you did there *will* be hell to pay, understood? I know the kid didn't act out just for the hell of it. Full reports. By noon. On my desk. And don't worry, I'll definitely be fact checking with JARVIS if the stories don't all line up."

Harley gasps in another attempt to catch his breath, positive he was going to suffocate right there in the middle of the room. But then Tony turns towards him with a worried crease in his brow.

"C'mere." He reaches towards Harley, wrapping an arm around his shoulders so he could guide him away from the group. He didn't want to make a big show of this... and that's exactly what this would become if they stood around any longer. Harley gasped again, eyes wide with panic as he fought fruitlessly against Tony's grip.

"No-no, please," He choked out through panicked breaths. "Sorry. Sorry. Please No."

"Sh-Sh-Shh," Tony hushed gently, pulling him in closer to his side as he led them towards the elevator. "It's okay. I'm not mad at you Kid. Just calm down."

Harley quits fighting against him, submitting to the fact that there was no escaping the man. It wasn't long before the three of them were within the private confines of the closed elevator. Tony drops Peter to his own two feet, much to the younger boy's irritation, and Harley finds himself guided into a rough hug. A strong arm is wrapped slowly around his upper back while a hand is flattened against the back of his head.

"Listen to my breaths, okay? This is perfectly normal. You aren't dying I promise. It's just a panic attack. It happens to the best of us. I need you to breathe in for me, okay? Breathe in with me... In... out. Good, good. You're doing so good." Harley's face is pressed firmly against the man's chest, and soon he finds himself shuffling closer to absorb the warmth, shifting his head so he can hide beneath the fabric of the man's open suit jacket, because it's warm, safe and dark enough to

hide away from the outside world for at least a short time. Tony noticed and shifted his arm to adjust the lapels of his jacket so it wrapped around Harley as much as it would allow. “You’re okay Kiddo. Everything’s fine. You’re gonna be fine.”

Harley’s head is fully hidden away beneath the jacket and Tony rests his cheek gently onto the large bump protruding from beneath his jacket’s breast pocket... only for a moment though, because it’s not until after he’d done it that he realized that this entire situation wasn’t exactly something he’d ever do for any of his men, making the situation for him all the more awkward. Though, the more he thought about it, the more he realized that Harley was still just an innocent kid. A kid that had been deprived of physical affection and emotional stability for a long, long time... making him so much more vulnerable despite how much Tony knew he didn’t want to be. Life had dealt the kid a bad hand, and Tony had promised two weeks prior that he’d do everything in his power to try and make up for it. So he supposed hugging the kid when he was upset and showing him just a tiny bit of TLC wouldn’t be so bad (*baby’s just need some tender, love, and care Tony. TLC. It’s in every parenting book you’ll ever read. That’s all you’ll need. Everything else will just fall into place, I promise. You’re more than capable of that, I know you are.*).

“Tony?”

The quivering voice is soft and Tony turned his head to look down as Peter slowly wrapped his arms around his leg, pressing his face into the side of his thigh and Tony instantly felt guilty... he had completely forgot Peter was there, and the boy looked downright terrified as he stared at Harley’s quivering body hiding away against Tony’s chest.

“Oh boy,” Tony huffed in amusement. He let his left arm fall so he could place his hand on top of Peter’s head, leaving his other arm around Harley. “You boys are gonna be the death of me. You got me goin’ all soft.” He let a lone finger trail softly along Peter’s hair and scratching against his scalp all while he pulled the kid closer to provide some form of reassurance. “He’s fine Bubba, I promise. Just a little shaken up.” The name slipped from his mouth without a second thought, and he found his cheeks reddening slightly.

Harley doesn’t respond, but Peter pulls himself closer so he’s practically wedged between Tony and Harley’s legs.

The elevator dings softly, and Harley jumps away abruptly as if suddenly startled back into consciousness, pushing out of the embrace with such force that it nearly sends Tony stumbling backwards. The kid’s breaths had evened out, thankfully, and Tony watched as he slowly backed out of the elevator without ever breaking eye contact.

He steps out too, well aware of the child hanging off his arm in a silent plea to be lifted up. He

doesn't though, much to Peter's chagrin. Tony simply grabs onto his tiny hand and leads him down the hall, his other hand gripping the back of Harley's neck so he doesn't end up running away like he kinda feared he would.

"Boss I'm sorry," Harley forced out during their silent trek towards... somewhere. Harley knew very well that they weren't headed in the direction of the man's office.

Tony doesn't offer a response further than the tightening of his hold on Harley's neck and the teen swallows the bile in his throat. They pass a couple lingering guards and other soldiers, all watching as Tony stoically leads the two boys across the small floor,

It isn't until they reach the door that Harley pauses, realizing where Tony had led them.

"I-I thought we weren't allowed in here..." Harley trailed off in a whisper.

"You're not unless I say you are." Tony answered, releasing Harley so he could reach out and open the door. "But I knew you'd be coming down to see me after Bruce was finished with ya, and I had Happy hide away all the dangerous crap because I still need to get some work done in here," he slowly trailed off and glanced down at Peter as he led the way into his workshop. "I didn't exactly baby-proof the place though... so maybe keep your hands to yourself in here Pete, yeah?"

Peter nodded fervently, whipping his head around to take in the sight of the room. It was like something you would see in the movies, and the last time Peter was in this particular room he just so happened to be too busy screaming bloody murder, so it hadn't been the most opportune time to properly absorb the entirety of the room.

It didn't take long for the kid to start bouncing, grasping Tony's hand tightly with both his hands as he hopped around in excitement before eventually turning to fall against Tony with his hands held insistently upwards, still bouncing with that wide, boyish grin on his face.

Tony relented with a sigh and scooped the boy up. "C'mon Harley. We gotta talk."

Harley flinched as if he had been struck. "Sir I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I promise to never let it happen again."

Tony looked at him over his shoulder as he made his way towards the small couch at the edge of the room. “You’re right. It better not happen again, but I need a full recap on what went on down there.”

Harley stared, unsure of the next step he was supposed to take.

“Come here,” Tony demanded sternly, gesturing towards the empty seat next to him. Harley is quick to comply, rushing forward to join the man on the couch and the situation felt oddly reminiscent to his morning with Pepper.

“I’m sorry sir. Please don’t kick me out. I-I like it here.”

“Kid just quit it,” Tony grunted in annoyance, casting the boy an irritated glare. “I’m not gonna hurt you, I’m not gonna do anything to put you in danger. I’m not gonna kick you out. You’re safe here. I thought we already went over this a while ago.”

“Well-well um. Yes. But that was before I did somethin’ stupid and reckless... y’know... I thought that only applied when I didn’t deserve it...” he trailed off at the end, both his voice and head lowering in submission as he fumbled with his hands in his lap.

It didn’t take long before he was being chunked under the chin rather harshly and he looked up to meet the eyes of an angry Tony Stark... like, *very* angry.

“Don’t you dare,” Tony threatened... though the threat didn’t seem all that threatening with the way he was cradling Peter against him, rocking softly as he patted his butt rhythmically as if trying to put him to sleep. “You’re a *good* kid Harley, don’t you ever say that you *deserve* to be hurt just because you made a dumb mistake. Now tell me what happened down there before I start getting irritated, yeah?”

That’s when Peter decided to butt in. “Excuse me they be mean!” He huffed, pushing against Tony’s chest so he could look the man in the face. “They call Ha’ley a baby! An-an they make fun of his new Daddy!”

Tony’s face twisted dangerously and his gaze snapped away from Peter to settle on Harley. “They *what* ?”

“It wasn’t- It wasn’t- It wasn’t like that!” Harley insisted vehemently. “They were just bein-”

“Excuse me it was!” Peter argued petulantly, patting Tony’s cheek insistently to grab the man’s attention once more. When he had it, he settled the man with a serious glare. “It was. They be mean and call ‘im a baby. He’s a big kid dough.”

Harley got angry. “That’s not how “excuse me” works Peter!” He shouts. And Peter doesn’t hesitate to shout right back.

“Yes it is! PepPep say to say excuse me when I need ta say someting when ‘nother person talk. So I say excuse me!”

“That’s enough,” Tony insists with only a slight raise of the voice. He fixes both the boys with a stern glare. “Peter thank you for helping, but can you let Harley share what he has to say?”

Peter’s eyes narrow cutely in frustration and he falls against Tony once more, mimicking Harley from earlier and burrowing his face beneath Tony’s jacket. Tony looks over at Harley to urge him on.

“They were just- They were just teasing sir... I-I just got mad is all.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “What were they saying Harley?”

Harley hesitated, mouth opening then closing again before he dropped his head and mumbled softly under his breath. He felt another chuck under his chin and he lifted his head back up.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you and stop mumbling. Tell me what they said about you and your father.”

Harley growled under his breath then huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. He couldn’t *lie* , because then when Tony found out what really happened, he’d probably be even more upset that he had lied straight to his face. “They were talking about you!” He retorted angrily.

“They were *what* ?” Tony found himself at a loss for what to say in response to that.

“They were talking about you,” Harley repeated.

“Yes I heard that part,” Tony snapped impatiently, “but what do you mean they were talking about me?”

Harley found himself bowing his head again, but thought better of it and snapped his head back up to look at Tony. “They-they were just teasing, saying that-that you’re like... like me and Peter’s dad ‘cause you’re all nice to us and stuff... Just teasing.”

Tony was very confused at this point. “...and that made you angry?”

Harley stuttered awkwardly. “I mean- I mean... it was just the way they said it y’know. I was... I was already kinda worked up from this morning and I guess that just pushed me over the edge. It really wasn’t a big deal; I just overreacted.

Tony stared at him, studying his face as if trying to determine if he were telling the truth.

“Okay fair enough... but when I get the reports in about exactly what went down, we’re gonna talk about this again. Alright?”

“Yes sir,” Harley answered.

“Quit with the sir crap.” Tony muttered, shifting Peter’s weight so he could stand from the couch.

“Well-well,” Harley fumbled, “o-okay Boss.”

“Just-” Tony drew in a sharp breath, face screwing into yet another irritated scowl. “Just... fine. Whatever. Now c’mon. I thought maybe you’d enjoy helping me with a little project of mine. Happy’s gettin’ sick and tired of replacing all your little tinkerin’ projects.” He gestured towards a table where the guts of some complicated machinery was spilled across it.

“Whoah,” Harley breathed as he inched closer. “Is this- is this-”

Before Harley could finish, Peter gasped loudly, little hands flying up to cover his mouth. “Excuse me It’s a robot!” He screech loudly, wiggling with such excitement Tony nearly dropped him.

Tony chuckled. “Looks like I got two little nerds on my hands. Wanna help us out too Pete?”

“Yes p’ease!” Peter grinned, bouncing exuberantly.

Tony slid out two extra stools from other workstations then took a seat in the original one between the two. He patted the seat on his left for Harley to take, then reached over to place Peter on the one to his right.

“Don’t touch anything unless I say it’s okay. Or else I’ll have Happy come get you, understood?” He instructed Peter, grabbing the boy’s chin to guide his face to look directly at him as he spoke instead of the robot to make sure the boy was listening.

Peter nodded fervently and reached up to grasp Tony’s wrist. He looked up at the man with a big smile and his chin jutted out. “Kiss?” He asked with an innocent flutter of his eyelashes.

Tony pursed his lips in exasperated amusement and he rolled his eyes. “I’ve started something terrible haven’t I?”

Peter only grinned at him and Tony sighed once before leaning down to place a quick, awkward peck on his forehead. “There, now sit your ass down and stay still.”

Pepper seethes, sitting on the couch with the news playing on the TV. She couldn’t believe Tony didn’t say anything to her, and at that very moment she wanted to do nothing more than march downstairs and slap the man senseless for keeping such important information from her. She had literally missed two turn of the century events in the course of two weeks just because she was pregnant with a paranoid lunatic’s baby.

She watched the press conference of Steve Rogers announcement about Hydra's infiltration into the NYPD, FBI, CIA, and NSA. She watched every possible news story that JARVIS would allow, anything pertaining to her husband's arrest and court-ordered execution to Hydra's infestation taking place across the entire globe. Her gut dropped further and further the longer she watched.

The world had descended into absolute chaos... Riots were breaking out among the people across the country. Protests were being held in every state to either execute Tony Stark, "the man behind the world's madness", and saving Tony Stark, "the only man capable of fixing what the world had deemed unfixable".

After that... Pepper cried. She cried and cried before she sniffled, cursed and growled out angrily before flinging the remote across the room. She reached for her phone and dialed the first man that came to her mind.

"Thank god you're alive," she breathed out after he answered, "I need to ask a favor."

Chapter End Notes

So... just a little background on this chapter...

This wasn't really part of the overall plan but when I was fixing to upload the next chapter I had written I realized that it left a lot of loose ends in the last chapter, so I decided to add two more chapters in between the last one and the one I had originally planned... so yeah that's why you guys had to wait so long, because I had to write this one from scratch sorry about that. It's probably gonna be the same for the next chapter too.

The next chapter is gonna have some more Pepperony background, and of course some more peter and tony development (I'm really getting into writing toddler peter. It's a heckuva lotta fun) So yeah. Stay tuned guys. I hope you have all enjoyed it so far and I'm sorry if it seems a bit rushed and thrown together, I just wanted to get something out soon. :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Hope you guys enjoy this one. I added in a little bit of everything

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Just give me five minutes with her and I’ll be able to tell you where she put the money. It’s really not as hard as your making it, Tony.” Rhodey bargained, bracing himself against Tony’s desk with both his hands. Tony peered up at him, unamused and frustrated.

“I said no.”

“Tony,” Rhodey sighed in exasperation, “if you don’t stop acting sweet on her, we’re never going to find that money. 5 billion dollars Tony. 5 Billion! She stole 5 billion dollars from you and you won’t do anything about it just because you have a little crush on her. Just forget her. She’s a liar. You’ll never be able to trust her, and she’s obviously not interested. For God’s sake man, just let me take a crack at her and everything will be back to the way it was and you can forget about that bitch.”

Tony looked up at him again, a deep frown on his face. “I can get my money back myself, thank you very much.”

“Oh really?” Rhodey laughed. “What are you gonna do, ask nicely? That hasn’t worked so well this past month pal. You gotta start acting serious about this or she’s gonna keep strutting around like she owns the place. It’s becoming a problem Tones... the guys are starting to fall for her charms and if you don’t get a handle on her soon, she’s gonna end up compromising their loyalty.”

“I’m working on it,” Tony snarled, head bowing and body hunkering over his desk as he continues scribbling across some old blueprints.

“Working on it? Really? C’mon man, you can’t let her get away with this. If it were any other woman that stole your money you would have pounded ‘em, got what you needed and thrown ‘em in a lake already. Admit it. She got in your head and now you’re smitten. She’s got you wrapped around her little finger. Snap out of it!”

"I'm not smitten," Tony argued childishly.

Rhodey raised his hands in a sarcastic surrender. "Excuse me, I'm sorry, I meant "you don't want to chance not being able to bang her"."

"Shut up," Tony growled out.

"I will if you can prove to me that you'll do something about that missing money!"

"Fine! I will," Tony retorted, standing from his desk and storming towards his office door. Rhodey follows closely behind him and they both enter the elevator waiting for them. Tony instructs JARVIS to take them to whatever floor Ms. Potts was on and they descend towards the Common Floor and Tony just hopes they don't find her in a compromising position. His men knew not to lay a finger on her in any way, shape, or form... and it's not because he was a jealous control freak.... He just knew that Ms. Potts was rather skilled with her hands, and he knew that most of the young men working for him wouldn't stand a chance against her charms.

"What's your plan?" Rhodey teased. "Gonna ask her on a date and woo her into getting your money. That worked pretty well for her." Rhodey laughed hysterically at his own joke.

"No," Tony growled out through bared teeth.

"Well, whatcha gonna-"

"Just shut up Rhodes! I'll figure it out."

Rhodey grins cheekily and turns away from his best friend to focus on the elevator doors.

JARVIS leads them across the floor to where Pepper was supposedly hiding out. Tony's strides are long and purposeful while Rhodey lags behind in a relaxed demeanor with his hands in his pockets. Then, Tony spots her and he halts in his steps, blinking stupidly as his brain fumbles to process what he was seeing.

She's standing in a dark corner in the hall, leaning into a familiar man, and the sight of him and how close he is to Pepper has his blood pumping faster, his neck heating up, and his veins pulsating in anger. Phil Coulson stood there pressed up against a wall with a smug grin on his face while Pepper trailed a lone finger down his chin, neck, chest and towards the next button of his shirt that needed to be popped open.

Rhodey's eyebrows rose and he turned to gauge Tony's reaction... which wasn't a great one. And he should have known, because Tony Stark was never one to share his things. Especially not with a man like Phil Coulson, a loyal follower of Nick Fury and their stupid organization, a knockoff of Stark called Shield.

Tony watched as Pepper leaned in closer to him, chest pressing up suggestively below his collarbone as she hooks a heeled foot around the back of his shin so she could whisper softly in his ear. He saw the ripples of a giggle travel down the length of her spine and he watched her hand settle softly on the arch of Coulson's collarbone, nails scratching hard enough to leave a light, red trail against his pale skin. Her shirt was tight and low to show off her chest and her shorts were short... very short.

She looked absolutely delicious and Tony had the sudden urge to forget the whole gentlemen act and seduce her with skilled, well placed kisses and featherlight touches until she finally gives into what he wants. But, Coulson's there, holding onto her, enjoying the attention that should be focused on him and only him. He's touching her, and she's touching him, and he felt the rage roaring in his ears bud into something that pumps his blood even faster. He's only felt jealousy a couple short times in his life, because he always got what he wanted in the end. Always. So, controlling his passionate drive of lustful jealousy was new territory, and he did his best to remain calm. There was no need for an outburst, because losing control meant losing face and he couldn't do that here.

Then she bit Coulson's ear gently with a sultry smirk, because she knew exactly what she was doing, and Coulson shivered noticeably, slowly sliding his hands from the small of her back into the back pockets of her shorts... and he squeezed.

That's when Tony lost it.

"Hey!" He shouted, voice wavering with a flaming anger. "What the hell do you think you're doing to her?"

It only took a couple strides for Tony to reach the pair, which didn't leave much time for Coulson to remove his hand or for Pepper to pull away. So instead, Tony growled deep in his throat and grabbed onto Pepper's wrist roughly, tugging her out of Coulson's grip before spinning back to

sock the man right in the jaw.

“Tony!” Pepper shouted angrily, pulling her wrist from his grip with a forceful tug before he could land another damaging hit on Coulson.

Tony turned, this time his anger focused solely on her as he stepped into her personal space. She backed up a pace and glared right back at him with a firm crease between her brows that Tony desperately wanted to kiss. She looked angry, but Tony still took a step to match her, ignoring her anger, putting them nearly chest to chest. “You think I’d be okay with you sucking the face of another man?” His voice was low and gravelly as he bit down on the urge to shout.

Pepper shoved him, scowling at him before pointing an accusatory finger into his chest. “You don’t own me Stark! I can do exactly as I please without worrying about what would or wouldn’t be pleasurable to you.”

Tony chuckled darkly and Pepper could see his eyes darken in the dim lighting. “That’s where you’re wrong Potts. I do own you.” He took another large step and this time reached out to wrap a strong arm around her waist, pulling her even closer. “You stole a hefty amount of my money. As far as I’m concerned,” he leaned in closely to whisper into her ear, “until I get my money back, I feel that I’m entitled to a great deal of compensation... I’ve tried to be nice, but I’m getting rather impatient and I’m ready to start collecting.”

Pepper scowled in disgust, hands braced on his chest to try and push him away. Tony pinned her arms down, wearing a wide, teasing smile. “Eh-eh-eh. Stop struggling Potts. You’re in my debt, so you do as I say.” Pepper, of course, being the fierce, independent woman she was, continues to fight against him. So, Tony rolls his eyes and turns to Rhodey.

“Hey Rhodes, get this Shield bastard outta here. Make sure he learns his lesson about keeping his hands to himself.” Then he turns to Coulson. “Spread the word Coulson, Ms. Potts belongs to me.”

“You disgusting bastard,” Pepper shouted in his face, fighting against Tony’s strong grip. Tony ignored her and waited for Rhodey to herd a frustrated Phil Coulson out of the dimly lit hall. Tony turns back towards Pepper.

“Honey please,” he sighs in exasperation, “don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be.”

“Screw you Stark,” she spits.

He grins, one hand trailing down her back to rest right above the curve of her ass. He taps his fingers on the sliver of exposed skin right above the waistband of her shorts. "That's the plan Sweetheart."

"Oh please," she rolls her eyes at the stupid innuendo. "Only in your dreams," she retorts. Her glare is hard and malicious, and she finally stops squirming against him, which was just a tiny bit disappointing. It felt good feeling her move against him so frantically.

"Ohh," Tony sighs, pulling her even closer so she can feel his growing excitement, "you've been the leading lady of my dreams for quite some time now Potts. After tonight," he licks his lips, "I have a feeling I'll be recurring in yours as well."

"Bite me," she snaps angrily at him, urging him on in one last attempt to break free.

"As you wish, Buttercup." Both his hands slide down slowly to graze over the pockets of her jeans, giving her the perfect moment to jerk out of the strong arms trapping her against him. She broke free and started to run.

"Oh-ho-ho," Tony chuckles with a lilt of excitement in his tone, "not so fast." It only takes a couple long strides before he has a grip on her arm once more and he's spinning her back into his arms. She stiffens.

"I have no desire to sleep with you Tony Stark. So if you really were to do what your threatening to, you'd be grazing at the top of your no-no list. I know you Stark. You won't do it. Now, leave me alone." She pushes against his arms.

Tony's nostrils flare angrily. "I don't think I'd be as opposed to it when you very much deserve it Ms. Potts. You stole 5 billion dollars sweetheart, any other person and I would have killed you already. Think of this as mercy."

"I'm calling your bluff Tony Stark," She challenged. "You haven't laid a hand on me until now... and you still need to know where I hid your money. You won't kill me until I tell you what you need, and for some reason you won't torture me for it, so I doubt your bold enough to actually defile me."

Tony grits his teeth. "Well, how do you suppose we take care of this then."

She looked him straight in the eye with an easy smile on her face. "Let me go and leave me alone."

"If you want me to let you go then give me my money." He snapped, gripping her arms a little tighter. He was edging between the line of peevish and pissed off, and Pepper's outright refusal to do as he says was only making him all the more irritated.

"I'm not just going to hand over 5 billion dollars Mr. Stark."

"Well," Tony retorts with a twitch of his nose, "I'm not just going to let you take it either Ms. Potts. So we've reached a bit of a dilemma."

They stand there for a moment, glaring, sizing each other up, until Tony breaks the silence with a husky voice.

"How about this Potts? One night. One night of tender, mind-numbing passion, and I'll let you leave with a fourth."

"Three-fourths," she argues.

"Half. Final offer." His heart stutters and begins beating faster in anticipation as he watches her contemplate his offer. "Then, when it's all over, I'll let you decide whether you really want to stay or leave... of course... I'll need your skills for a couple projects of mine in the future so you can continue to pay off your debt if you do decide to leave."

"I don't believe you for a moment Stark," Pepper smiles knowingly. "You'll never let me walk out of this building alive."

He grins impishly. "You caught me."

She smiles suggestively, leaning into him so she can wrap her arms around his neck. "How about this?" she whispers into his ear. "We have one night of fun... and you give me a job. I know you

can use my skills around here Stark. This place needs a bit of a woman's touch."

His eyebrows lower lustfully. "Just one night?"

She purses her lips and raises her eyebrows, toying with the ends of his hair curling at the nape of his neck. "How 'bout we see how good you are first Mr. Stark."

Tony growls playfully and leans down to capture her lips in a passionate kiss. "I'm about to rock your world Ms. Potts."

"Phil I need to ask a favor." Pepper begins, already pacing back and forth in front of the couch while the morning news continues playing in the background.

"Pepper? What's wrong?" Phil's voice sounds muffled over the phone and Pepper frowns.

"It's Tony."

"What'd he do this time?"

"It's what he didn't do," Pepper snapped in annoyance, throwing her head back to groan. "He didn't tell me about Ross' kill order on him... they can't do that! If he would have just told me I could have had this problem fixed in an instant, but no. He just has to be a stubborn, paranoid *man*, and I'm left with a huge mess to clean up."

"Pepper," Phil began, "don't take this the wrong way, but... have you been living under a rock? This whole thing has literally created an absolute uproar. Human rights, Justice, World domination, the works. How are you just finding out about it now?"

"First of all," Pepper retorted, a hand landing on her hip, "why am I just finding out now that you've been alive all this time?"

“Okay, that’s not fair. You’re married to the man that tried to kill me. Why would I tell you I’m alive? I don’t need your crazy husband hunting me down again... now answer my first question please. What in the world had you so busy this past month that you didn’t know about the court ordered trial on your husband?”

“Kill order,” Pepper corrected.

“No, not quite. This whole thing has just been blown out of proportion. It’s a trial, but during the press conference, Ross was being an idiot again and admitted that they had enough on Tony to execute him if he were to be found guilty in court. The rest of the world are the ones making a big deal of it... but as long as Tony just stays under the radar like I told Rogers to tell him, then it should blow over within the year once I get things settled over here and take care of Hydra. He doesn’t go to trial unless someone working directly for the government finds him.”

“Oh gosh,” Pepper groans, sitting down on the couch and cradling her head in her hand. “This Hydra thing is such a mess... Are you really going to be able to take care of it on your own?”

There was a short pause on the other line.

“I’m afraid not. Hydra runs deeper than what we originally thought. They’re literally everywhere Pepper. They’re like-They’re like-like mosquitos.”

“Mosquitos? That’s the best you can come up with?” Pepper deadpans with a shake of her head.

“Whatever,” Phil grumbled, “but I’m working on it. I’ve tried getting in touch with Tony in hopes of reconciling so we can work together... I don’t have very many reliable men left and well-Tony’s one of the few people I feel I can trust right now.”

Pepper nods to herself. “Is he screening your calls?”

“Yep. Just like the good ol’ days.”

Pepper laughed. “Well, to be fair... you were with Shield. But I think there might be a way to fix

both our problems.”

“What’s this bright idea of yours Ms. Potts?”

Pepper laughs. “Well, you know that kid on the news? Richard Parker’s son. The famous scientist.”

“Yeah. We’ve been looking for him. What about him?”

Pepper hesitates. “We have him and he’s fine,” she quickly reassures him to avoid any unfavorable assumptions. “Natasha grabbed him on a recent visit to Oscorp and Tony found out Richard was abusing him... so we kept him. He’s perfectly content here with us, so don’t worry.”

“Oh I’m not worried... I hate Richard Parker. Terrible man. Always hated him, but he did a lot of work for Shield so... y’know... Tony’s handling having a kid around pretty well I presume?”

“Yes, he’s getting there. It’s just a little hard considering he’s... a Parker. But-um Tony seems to think there’s a correlation between Oscorp and Hydra. He’s been looking for Richard quite religiously from what I’ve heard... but the man’s smart and he went into hiding before Tony could get his hands on him.”

There’s no answer so Pepper takes that as a sign to continue. “I know that you probably know better than anybody where to find him.”

“And what? Kill him? We’ll need to get as much information out of him before-”

“No, don’t kill him... just-just find him. Bring him to Tony and then I’ll take care of the rest. ”

Two Days Later...

Tony rubs his forehead as he works through the paperwork piled on his desk. Sometimes the work

between being both the leader of a not-so-secret mafia/mob (both seem a bit too informal for what he does) organization and the CEO of a multibillion dollar company used to cover up that not-so-secret mafia organization is quite a bit. Usually he's able to push a lot of the work onto Pepper or Rhodey... but Rhodey's in Europe taking care of some things in Italy, and well, Pepper's kinda sorta on probation. So, that just leaves him to mull over the mind-numbing paperwork.

He's most definitely not a businessman, never has been and never will be. He's not good at that kind of stuff; playing by all the little rules to keep everything legal and everyone happy. No thanks. Pepper takes care of everything like that... she's good with money, she's good with people, and she's good with bending the rules in a way that no one has ever thought of before. Stark Industries is her baby, she's made it into the fortune-500 it is today. It's so much more sophisticated, professional, and realistic than what his father, Howard, had created way back when to legitimize the weapon-sales contract between him and the government. Though they have been struggling the past few months after he cut out all weapons sales towards the government and other under the table buyers. And before the whole pregnancy scare, Pepper had been building a new team of Engineers for their new and improved R&D Department, most of whom are working for him already in the not so legal sense... They still had so much work to do if they wanted SI up and running again before things go to hell on his end.

He groans in exasperation and cocks his head to the side to look at the television screen hung on the wall. He watches for a couple moments as the news lady's mouth opens and closes without any sound, her face screwed down in a serious frown. Then a familiar picture pops up in the corner of the screen and it grabs his attention.

"Unmute JARVIS."

At his instruction, the office is filled with the low tone of the anchorwoman as she goes on to explain the recent report of a missing Richard Parker.

"-ard Parker, leading scientist and researcher in genetic mutation, was declared missing earlier this morning after his home was found ransacked by his partner Norman Osborn. The police speculate it may be correlated with the missing child report of Peter Parker, Richard Parker's son, that had been filed two weeks ago. He had reported that the man who had taken his son requested no ransom, and was instead invested in his life's research and work. It would not be outlandish to assume that Mr. Parker has simply given up on finding his son and has fled the country before whoever took his son decides to take him to get what they want, but Norman Osborn and President Ross, who had partnered with Oscorp plenty of times in the past, both insist to take every precaution because of the unannounced breakthrough they claim Richard had almost completed-"

"Mute!" Tony scowls, slamming his fist on the table in frustration. He knew he should have sent

Romanoff out for him earlier than he did. Now he'd have to wait even longer and that PISSED him off.

His silent brooding was interrupted by a loud knock on his office door.

"Mr. Hogan requests entry sir."

Tony grumbles under his breath and waves a disgruntled hand in the air. "Come in!"

The large door opens quickly and Tony props his chin on his palm and watches in mild amusement as an angry Happy drags an irritated Harley into the room by the scruff of his neck.

Tony refrains from rolling his eyes, because this is quite possibly the fourth time in the past two days that he's been subjected to one of Happy's angered rants regarding the teen.

"What's he done this time Hap?"

Happy stops when he's within a few feet from Tony's desk and scowls down at Harley still struggling fruitlessly to break free from his grip.

"Let go of me you asswipe!" Harley growled out, aiming a shove at Happy's side, but it didn't work. Happy was a rock and Harley was still a stick, though his tenacity seemed to say otherwise.

Tony raised his eyebrows in surprise, but Happy's face remained neutral as he readjusted his grip so he had a fist of the back of Harley's shirt in his hand. "He was in the gym messin' with the weapons. The guns specifically."

"You were *what*?" Tony growled, attention snapping over to focus on Harley with a glare. Harley met his eyes with a glare of his own and a snarl Tony hadn't heard from him since the day they'd met. "You heard him." The kid spat before wrestling with Happy's grip once more.

"You don't get to talk to me like that Keener." Tony warned, standing abruptly from his chair to brace his body with both arms on his desk, looming over him.

“Or what?” Harley crowed, “You gonna hit me? Do it. I dare you!” He throws himself against Happy’s grip, as if lunging towards Tony to attack him, but Happy holds him back with a more than uncomfortable grip around the back of his neck.

Tony felt his face begin to redden from the restraint to lash out. It’d been a long time since he’d been shown such disrespect... and this was the only instance where he wouldn’t allow himself to do anything about it. At least not the conventional way.

“Now you see what I’m talking about,” Happy grumbled, releasing the snarling child with a light shove towards Tony’s desk. “He’s brat when you’re not around.”

“No!” Harley snarled, turning back around to spit out angered words at him, “you’re just an annoying prick!”

Tony didn’t really know how to handle the sudden mood swing. All he knows is that he was pissed before the kid came trotting in with a bad attitude, and now he’s more pissed having to deal with it. “Out Happy. I need to have a word with Keener alone.” Tony felt a tiny seedling of triumph sprout when he saw the kid’s face fall into a worried frown before returning to the aggressive snarl.

Happy eagerly left the room, leaving Harley in front of his desk with his arms crossed over his chest and his head lowered to glare at his shoes. Tony’s nostrils flared once in anger, but he took in a couple deep breaths to cool down and he sat back down in his office chair. He didn’t need to yell and that’s probably what he’d end up doing if he spoke while still angry.

“Do you wanna tell me what’s going on with you?”

“Nothing’s going on,” Harley grumbled with his head still lowered.

“Look at me when I’m speaking to you.” Gosh. Tony feels like he’s said that particular phrase a thousand times in regards to this kid. Harley doesn’t raise his head though. He remains stubbornly still, but Tony can see the redness in his cheeks, and he can see his shoulders quaking.

“Hey!” Tony tries again, raising his voice and narrowing his eyes. “Don’t ignore me-”

“Or what?” Harley asked for a second time, finally lifting his head to look Tony dead in the eye.
“What. Are. You. Gonna. Do?!”

Tony frowned and he felt his breathing pick up significantly. He couldn’t understand why Harley was challenging his authority. He was a good kid, and he always did what he was told. He didn’t understand.

“What are you gonna do about it, you pussy?!” Harley shouted, stomping his foot emphatically.

The rage boiled over quickly and Tony found himself vaulting from his chair and rounding the desk to come toe to toe with Harley. He didn’t touch... he didn’t dare touch him. Not while his judgement was clouded from the stress and frustration. And the fact that Harley was glaring up at him with that defiant frown only fueled his instinct to instill fear.

“Try that again, *kid*,” he spat out the word like it were a testament to his disgust and anger.

“I said...” Harley paused for emphasis, “what are you gonna do about it, you pu-”

Before he could finish the sentence Tony grabbed his chin roughly and squeezed. He forcefully angled the kid’s head down, but maintained eye contact and lowered his head as well to whisper. “Listen to me loud and clear kid,” Tony growled through gritted teeth. “I don’t know what the hell has gotten into you, but it needs to stop. Right here, right now. Understand?” He could feel the minute vibration of Harley’s chin quivering, but the kid held his ground.

“Or-or you’re gonna hurt me? Hit me.” He eggs him on again, biting down hard on his bottom lip.

That’s when it strikes him, and Tony’s able to understand what’s going on in that kid’s head. He could remember challenging his father as a young boy, trying to establish where the line stood between a few threats and a hard beating... it didn’t take much effort to figure it out.

So, his aggressive scowl devolves into a frustrated frown. He drops his hand from Harley’s chin and lifts it to rest on his head. The movement is fast enough to trigger Harley’s old habits, and the boy is jolting away from the touch as if he were about to be struck. Tony doesn’t back down though and he rests his hand on Harley’s head, thumb pressed into his forehead.

“Buddy, please look at me.”

Harley looks up at him, face devoid of any anger or resentment from earlier, but he remains stoic and neutral.

“Are you trying to test me? See how much pushing it takes for me to smack you?”

The kid doesn't say anything, but Tony *knows* . He can tell just by the look on his face.

“I told you I wouldn't hurt you. Is that what this is about? Did you not believe me? C'mon kid, we just had this talk two days ago.” His hand dropped to Harley's shoulder, but Harley shrugged it off and stepped away.

Tony rolled his eyes at the dramatics and waited silently for Harley to speak up.

“Fine,” the kid finally mumbled, “I get that you don't wanna hurt me 'cause of your dad and stuff, but... just-I just... I can handle being smacked around a little, y'know. I'm not a little kid, I can handle stuff like that. You don't have to be so careful around me...”

“So... what I'm getting is you want to be treated like the other guys?”

Harley looked up at him and smiled. “Yeah... I-It makes me look like a baby when no one's allowed to lay a hand on me because you're scared it might break me or somethin'.”

“You're a kid,” Tony reasoned with him slowly, arms crossing over his chest, “which means you need to be protected. So I'm protecting you and you need to deal with that.”

“I'm not a kid. I-”

“Yes you are,” Tony insisted sharply.

“You don’t have to treat me with kid gloves like you do Peter. I get that you feel responsible for me and everything but that doesn’t mean I can’t handle myself! You won’t even let me go outside by myself to see my friends. I can’t go anywhere without a babysitter following me! And I’m not even allowed to touch the weapons in the gym! I’m not stupid Boss! You don’t have to treat me like I’m your breakable little bastard son!”

Tony sighed and threw his head back. “Is that what this is about? Because I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t be objecting to the special treatment if it wasn’t for those idiots. They were out of line and it won’t happen again kid. Nobody really thinks that about you, alright? It’s only been a few weeks, it’s normal to have to be chaperoned when you used to be loyal to a rival, alright? And I’ll stop being nice to you if that’s what you want.”

Harley nodded solemnly, face twitching slightly. “Thankyou.”

“You’re welcome...” Tony paused then took a menacing step towards him. “Now tell me what the hell you were doing messing with those weapons when you were explicitly told not to *touch* them.”

“What? I-uh.”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses!” Tony snapped, jabbing a finger into his chest, sending him stumbling backwards. “I’m sick and tired of your recklessness, you hear me? You’re privileged that I even let you set foot in this building! If I hear one more complaint from Happy, I won’t hesitate to send you to a solitary floor where you can’t cause any more trouble.” Harley’s eyes are wide as he stares up at Tony in surprise. “You keep saying you wanna go out and help, but until you can prove that you’re not a whiny, reckless child that can’t follow the simplest of orders then you have no business being out there in the streets! You hear me?!”

Tony moves away, spinning on his heel. He reaches over his desk and grabs a large pile of papers. “So, for your insubordination I want you to group, transcript, scan, and file all of these documents, color coded by date and department. I want it on my desk by midnight tonight, do I make myself clear?”

“Uh, yes’ sir.” Harley nods a bit too quickly. “But how-”

“Good, now sit your ass down where I can see you and get to work.”

Tony chuckles under his breath as he watches Harley scurry to the table at the corner of the room

to get to work. Tony sat back down, shook his head in amusement and got back to his own work.

He didn't last another ten minutes before he heard the familiar pitter-patter of tiny feet bolting down the hall outside his office. Then the muffled chants of "Tony, Tony, Tony" right outside his door and he found himself smiling slightly as he quickly scrawled his messy signature across another page. He still couldn't understand Peter's obsession with him.

"Alright, let's go see Tony," He heard Pepper's voice say through a tired sigh while his office door was slowly opening. It barely opened a crack before Peter was wedging himself into the room and clambering towards Tony's desk with a wide grin on his face. "Tony!"

"Hey Bug, what's up?" He put down his pen and leaned his forearms against his desk. Peter's tiny head peeked over the side, using his little hands gripping edge to pull himself up onto his tippy toes so he could see the man's face.

"I misst you!" He declared with a loud giggle.

Tony gasped dramatically. "How can you miss me already? I just saw you this morning."

Peter giggled again and released his grip on his desk to spin around and barrel back towards Pepper who was slowly making herself towards the desk as well with a small book in her hand. The boy collided into her legs and nuzzled his face against the side of her thigh like he was trying to hide.

"Hey Hon," Tony stood to greet her, but her attention was aimed towards Harley hunched over a pile of papers in the corner. She turned back to look at him and frowned.

"What's Harley doing over there?" She questioned, reaching down to rest a hand on Peter's head to calm his hyper bouncing.

"Did something stupid this morning, so I stuck him with some meaningless busy work..." Tony cracked a smile as he looked over at the kid. "He said he didn't want me to be nice to him anymore, so..."

Pepper gave him a look so he retreated back a step and raised his hands defensively.

“Hey it was his request. I’m only respecting his wishes.”

Pepper’s frown didn’t falter, instead she held out the thin book towards him. He looked at the cover and raised his eyebrows. He takes it from her slowly.

“Peter refuses to go down for a nap,” she rubs her temple with a sigh and Tony glances down at the vibrating child at her side. He didn’t seem like much of a troublemaker in the moment, but he could understand the problem with the whole “nap” thing.

“Okay?” He drawls, “what do you want me to do about it?”

Pepper shot him a menacing look, but that didn’t help clear the air on what she was wanting him to do.

“PepPep said ‘ou migh’ read me a sto’y if I p’omise to s’leep.”

“Oh,” Tony nods sagely, “I see.” He averts his eyes just for a moment towards his wife and he gulped... she didn’t look happy and Tony knew instantly that it was one of *those* days.

“I’d really love to Peter, but I have a lot of work to do. Maybe Harley could read to you.” He held out the book towards the boy, but Peter’s happy-go-lucky face screwed down into an irritated scowl.

“No!” He demanded with a stomp of his foot. Tony raised his brows at the outburst.

“No?”

“No,” Peter insisted again. “I wan’ ‘ou to read me a sto’y.”

Tony blinked. Since when did he start getting bossed around by four-year-olds? It knocked him back a bit into thinking about his interaction with Harley moments earlier. Since when did he have to deal with sassy kids in general?

“Peter,” Pepper snapped sternly, appearing to be on the verge of an angry outburst, but she skillfully held herself back. Peter had probably tested her patience one too many times already that day. “That wasn’t very nice. Why don’t you try that again?”

Peter’s scowl disappeared and was replaced with an apologetic pout as he looked up at Pepper with wide eyes before turning back to Tony with a quivering lip. “I sorry Tony.” He hung his head and crossed his little arms over his chest. “Can ‘ou-Can ‘ou *p’ease* read ‘o me?”

Tony still didn’t respond right away. A crease formed between his brows as he contemplated the request... he really needed to get some work done... but it shouldn’t take that long to read a children’s book, right? That’s when Pepper interrupted his thought process.

“Is it SI paperwork?” Her annoyance seemed to have mellowed somewhat at the prospect of paperwork. That’s when Tony was reminded once more that his wife was crazy, because no sane person would be honest to goodness excited by the concept of paperwork. Then again, she rounded him out perfectly in every way.

“Yes it is,” he responded, slowly trying to determine if it would be a good idea to push all the heavy work onto his pregnant wife who was *supposed* to be staying away from work. Pepper seemed to know exactly what he was thinking and she narrowed her eyes at him.

Tony swallowed and pushed the colorful book he was holding into Peter’s hands. “Why don’t you go get settled on the couch. I’ll come join you soon.” Peter happily obliged and scurried over towards the couch against the wall. Tony turned to look back at his wife with a stern frown.

“I can tell you aren’t feeling good. Are you sure you want to do paperwork of all things?”

Pepper sighed and stepped into him to wrap her arms around his torso and lay her head on his shoulder. “I’m fine Tony,” she mumbled as Tony wrapped his arms around her as well and rested his cheek against the side of her head. “I’m just getting a little stir crazy. I’m not doing anything productive and that’s more stressful than anything else, especially after I found out about you know what.” Her tone dropped into that familiar irritated *‘I’m never letting this go’* type way.

Tony sighed and rubbed her back, because he knew what “*what*” was. He knew what the “*what*” was going to be the morning he removed JARVIS restrictions for the news. That same afternoon Pepper had cornered him with a strange flicker in her eyes, and he didn’t realize it was anger until

too late, though he really should have known. He got a long lecture that night about secrets and many of his recent behaviors that had been lovingly dubbed as idiotic and ridiculous. He didn't tell her more than what was strictly necessary for her to know of course, but the fact that she knew anything at all lifted a heavy weight off his chest, because now he didn't have to worry about hiding it from her.

"Alright fair enough," he sighed. She let go of him and waddled her way around his desk to take a seat in his office chair with a smile.

"Harley, Honey," she called from her seat. The boy looked up from his papers to acknowledge her and Pepper smiled sweetly at him. "Why don't you come over and keep me company. Bring the work Tony gave you."

Harley looked apprehensive. His grip tightened around the pencil he was holding and he cast a nervous glance towards Tony for his approval. Tony huffed an amused sigh and nodded. Harley responded with a tiny smile and a leap into action as he gathered the papers around him.

"Toooonnnny!" Peter called out impatiently from the couch, smacking the hard cover a couple times with the palm of his hand.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Tony called back with a roll of his eyes. Peter watched him closely as he walked over to make sure he didn't wander off and get distracted by something else. Tony took a seat beside a few good inches away from him, but Peter just scooted closer to close the distance and thrust the book into his hands.

Tony fumbled for just a moment before fixing the book upright in both his hands so he could get a real look at it. "Hop on Pop?"

"Yep!" Peter grinned. He grabbed onto Tony's elbow and made an effort to lift it up and away from his side. Tony eyed him suspiciously with a small hint of amusement as he struggled to lift the man's heavy arm in the air.

"Whatcha doin' there kid?" He questioned affectionately as Peter attempted to wedge his head into the small space he had made between Tony's arm and side. Peter doesn't respond to him. He's too focused on his task, so Tony lifts his arm slightly to assist him in his efforts.

Peter tucks himself beneath his arm then starts wiggling around in the tiny space he'd trapped

himself in between Tony's arm and side so he could reach around to tug at Tony's suit jacket, straining to pull the fabric out as far as he could. Tony just watched and made no effort to stop him as the kid wrapped the jacket flap around himself and relaxed against Tony's side.

"You good now?" Tony chuckled.

Peter nodded and draped an arm over Tony's abdomen to snuggle closer.

"Alright," Tony said, clearing his throat and kicking his feet up onto the coffee table in front of them. "Now that we're all settled, let's get started. Ahem." He flips open to the first page and looks at it for a moment and frowns. He grabs onto the next page and flips back and forth between the two as if trying to figure out some sort of puzzle. "What in the world? There's only like three words a page. What kind of book is this?" He voices his annoyance with a frustrated growl.

"A children's book." Pepper answered from the desk without ever tearing her eyes away from the papers in front of her.

Tony scoffed and angrily flipped his way back to the beginning. Peter patted him softly on the stomach as if he were trying to reassure him and Tony's brows furrowed.

"Shhh," Peter hushed with another couple pats. "Read."

"Fine," Tony huffs. He rushes through the first page and moves to flip to the next, but Peter quickly reaches out to grab his hand.

"Not like that," he whines, craning his head to look up at him. "Read it like PepPep and 'appy."

Happy read this book to Peter? And Peter enjoyed it? Ah, hell no. He could do way better than Happy.

And he did. He enunciated each of the words slowly and allowed a maximum of 5 seconds for Peter to look at the pictures before they moved on. Peter didn't interrupt once, completely entranced by the ridiculous story as Tony read. The book didn't seem to have a plot, but he supposed that wasn't the point... it was probably just used to teach kids to read, because there was a *lot* of rhyming. A lot.

After a while, Tony started feeling warm and relaxed as he droned on in a soft voice, reading a children's book. It was a nice breath of fresh air to just read a pointless book with pointless words and silly pictures with funny looking creatures. He hated to admit it, but he found it somewhat enjoyable.

He felt the warm weight of Peter's arm across his stomach, and he could hear the couple times Peter yawned loudly before nuzzling his face against his side before turning back to look at the story with lazy blinks. It made Tony feel like a normal person for the first time in his life. Just a Dad reading a silly book to his son... but Peter wasn't his son, he was just using that idea as a metaphor... all he knew was that he'd never felt so at ease, sitting there with a tiny person tucked under his arm and a book propped up against his legs. So, maybe that's why he was just a little bit peeved when he felt his cell phone vibrating in his pocket, interrupting the story. It was probably important because there was just so much going on right now and he couldn't risk missing out on information that could mean life or death... so he bent at an awkward angle so he could fish it from his pants pocket already tense and frustrated at the prospect of losing the relaxing headspace he'd found while reading to Peter. He took one glance at the screen and frowned... It wasn't Romanoff, or Hogan, or Rhodey and he wasn't in the mood.

"Harley," he called out, patting Peter reassuringly on the leg in a promise that they would continue shortly.

Harley scurried towards them and Tony held out his phone to him. "Talk to Rogers will ya. Tell him I'm busy and ask what he wants." He adjusts himself on the couch so he's angled closer to Peter, hip digging into the cushion, and he returns to reading. "No Pat no," he croons dramatically, "Don't sit on that." He flips to the next page and Harley answers the phone.

"Hello?" He answers without any waver in his voice as he speaks. Tony only smiles slightly in pride.

"Sad Dad Bad Had," Tony continues, "Dad is sad."

"Yeah, no. It's Harley... Tony's busy right now. What d'ya want?"

"Very, very sad. He had a bad day. What a day Dad had."

Harley scoffs then growls into the phone. "I just told you he's busy. He told me to talk to you."

Tony turns for a moment to look at the kid as Harley holds out the phone towards him. “Nope,” he shakes his head, leaning away, “the kiddo’s just about to fall asleep. If I start talking the conversation’s never gonna end.” He turns back to the book. “Thing Thing. What is that Thing?”

“He said he doesn’t want to talk to you ‘cause you always end up talkin’ too much...” Tony snorts at Harley’s choice of words. “I told you he’s busy. He’s reading to Peter... yeah. He can’t talk ‘cause he’s almost got him to fall asleep-”

“Excuse me, M’not,” Peter protests with a big yawn, leaning forward to fix Harley with a glare.

Tony pulls him back down and hushes him, tucking him in closer again. The sooner he could get Peter to sleep the sooner he could get back to work, which was exactly what he would rather be doing, right? Right. “Song, Long. A long, long, song.”

“Thankyou,” Harley groans, “see was that so hard?” He hangs up the phone and passes it back to Tony with a frown. “That dude’s annoying.”

“Don’t I know it,” Tony hums softly without breaking his gaze from the book. “What did he want?”

“He wanted me to tell you that Barnes accepted the job into Ross’ secret service and he’ll set up communications as soon as he’s secure.”

“Awesome. Thanks kid.” He smiles and Harley walks away. “Good-by Thing. You sing too long.”

Peter listens attentively through the whole story, and at some point Tony found himself somewhat invested in it too. So, he guesses it was understandable that he was a little disappointed when he reached the last page of the book... and Peter was still awake. He was almost sure the kid would’ve passed out at some point during the story.

Peter yawned again, reaching out with grabby hands towards the book when Tony started shifting to set it somewhere.

“Again?” He whispered softly. “P’ease.”

And because Tony was a softy now, and not because he actually kinda liked the book, he relented and pulled the book back to prop it against his legs like he had earlier. He flipped it back over to the cover and bit down on a smile before he started reading once more.

“Hop on Pop,” he read. “By Dr. Seuss.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope y'all enjoyed it!! Next chapter we get into a little more fun stuff *evil smirk*...

[EDIT] Short Disclaimer for those reading this as a "finished/very close to finished" fic in the middle of the night, this would be the best place to stop and sleep or take a small break to eat or pee. Consider this the end of Act 1 (believe me there will be no better places to stop at in the coming chapters). There's no cliffhanger and it's left of on a nice happy note. And if you have to get up for work or school in the morning and its 2am... just go to sleep because you and I both know you need to. Got it? Take care of yourself, alright? This fic will still be here in the morning. I promise ;)

Thx guys! I love you all so so so much for your support. I love hearing from each one of you, it always makes me smile. Thank you for reading :) Have a fantabulous Friday (or whatever day you might be reading this)

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

This one is a little dark... so be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony adjusts his knee with a little bounce, humming under his breath dramatically as his eyes scanned across the line of printed letters along his desk. A tiny smile crept up at the corners of his mouth and he bounced his knee once more just to hear the soft, almost indiscernible, giggle that emitted from the munchkin residing there.

“Hmm, Alright,” he paused, neck craning to the side to glance at the young boy in his lap. A few tufts of his curly hair tickled the underside of his chin as he did so and he smiled, eyes relaxed and lips stretched to show the prominent wrinkles developing on his cheeks. His gaze turned back to the paper on his desk and he dropped his pointer finger lands on the letter ‘P’. “What is this letter?” He immediately turns his head back down to watch Peter as he waited for the boy’s answer.

Peter’s fingers slowly crawl up his chin and slip between his lips as he thinks long and hard about the question he’d been asked. Tony bounces him faintly on his knee and Peter grins between his fingers emitting a steady hum to hear the lilt his voice made with every up and down motion of Tony’s knee. Tony stops the bouncing and quickly reaches up and pulls the boy’s fingers away from his mouth, holding the slimy hand in his own so the boy isn’t enticed by the urge.

“D?” Peter finally asks with a bit of unsurity, craning his head backward to look up at the genius. His eyes squinted in confusion with an eyebrow raised and his other hand slowly crept towards his mouth with his pointer finger extended, but Tony quickly grabbed onto that one too, clasping both of Peter’s hands between his own and resting them in the boy’s lap.

“Not quite,” Tony smiled, “but so close. ‘D’ is over here.” He rests his finger on the D at the other end of the paper.

“What’s this one?” He moves back to the ‘P’.

“Uhhhh,” Peter hums, squinting his eyes even more to focus. “Uhh, Puh-Puh...?” He makes the noise with a questioning cadence, looking up at Tony for further reassurance.

“Good, getting closer,” Tony praises, and Peter grins in triumph before ripping his hands away from Tony’s grip to throw them in the air as he exclaims the answer excitedly.

“‘P’!” He shouts grinning toothily at the man.

“Yes,” Tony smiles back and lifts his hand to smooth down the errant curls popping out of the mess of hair Pepper had attempted to tame that morning, “and that’s the first letter of your name. Peeeter. Do you hear it?”

“Yeah!” Peter nods enthusiastically, clapping his hands emphatically. “What’s the next one?” He turns his head to look back down at the paper. He watches Tony’s large, calloused hand closely as it trails across the sheet to land on another letter.

Peter’s nose puckers cutely in disgruntled confusion as he struggled to recall the name of the letter.

“It rhymes with ‘P’” Tony supplied helpfully with another couple encouraging bounces of his knee.

“Uhhh-uhh. E-E?”

“Yes!” Tony grinned, “Very good.”

They had been working on the letters for nearly half the morning, and for some reason, Tony found more joy at Peter’s aptitude for learning than anything else he’d done in the past month. The way Peter’s eyes would brighten in triumph and his wide smile when he received praise. Just being exposed to Peter’s little-boy innocence and compassion had Tony smiling more and worrying less. He didn’t feel the overwhelming urge to shoot a man in the head at the smallest provocation and he just... he felt normal.

So, when Pepper asked him to take Peter down to his office with him that morning, he didn’t put up *too* much of a fight. It wasn’t like he planned on getting much done anyway... Pepper hadn’t been feeling great, expressing the need to rest, and Happy was busy harassing the new recruits so they’d be ready to handle important business when the need arose. Of course, Tony was sure to put up a bit of a fuss for appearances sake, but he gladly carried Peter in his arms as he made his way down to his office, biting down on a smile as the boy draped himself over his shoulder to wave animatedly at everyone they had passed during their trek down the hall. Everyone had seemed just

as happy to see Peter as Peter was to see them, but no one approached them, and, instead, veered out of his path when they saw him coming.

When they had reached the office, Tony, to his credit, at least made an effort to get some work done before he inevitably got distracted. He mulled over his latest theory on enhanced cellular regeneration. He wasn't a biology expert by any means, but he knew his way around enough to construct a somewhat viable schematic for a nitrous oxide-based spray canister to apply it... it was, of course, just a working theory, but Tony could only begin to imagine the benefits it would have for his men. Peter had behaved for the first half-hour. He hummed songs Pepper had taught him under his breath, flipping through colorful books-- featuring laughable artistic renderings of animals and people-- that had slowly accumulated in Tony's office over the past week and a half.

Though, of course, as a needy, touch-starved four-year-old, it wasn't long before Peter was pushing insistently at Tony's leg with a book tucked under his little armpit. Tony had acknowledged him for a moment, indulging him with a quick kiss before insisting for only ten more minutes, but Peter hadn't been having it. He humphed and took it upon himself to scale up the man's legs, fueled only by his stubbornness and determination to have the man's full attention on him and him alone. It took a while, but eventually, with enough frustrated nudges of Peter's head pushing against the large arms blocking his path and strong fistfuls of Tony's trousers, the boy was able to haul himself up and situate himself in the man's lap, moodily slapping the book on his own lap and shoving Tony's arm harshly to get his attention with a furrow between his brows.

Tony didn't get any more work done after that. One thing had led to another. He and Peter went through a good one or two random Dr. Seuss books, one Skippy John Jones, a Hungry, Hungry Caterpillar, and Hop on Pop at least two more times before Peter seemed to grow bored and expressed an interest to learn to read himself.

Tony had been impressed by his own endurance when it came to reading tedious, ridiculous children's books filled with rhymes and words that probably didn't exist. He had never pictured himself being able to do it before, but there he was, and he hated to say that he was getting kinda good at it.

But when Peter huffily voiced his wish to be able to read for himself, Tony was already formulating ideas. An hour later and Peter nearly had the entire alphabet memorized. Tony had no idea he could feel such pride.

"You have him?" Pepper questioned through a heavy breath.

“I’m looking right at him, Pep. You ready for me to bring him your way?”

“No, not yet.” Pepper breathed out slowly, pushing a series of long breaths from her lips to calm herself down. “I need to fix a couple of protocols for JARVIS and I need to talk to Rhodes... because you’ll be shot on-site if you just walk in here unannounced.” She pressed a hand to her stomach and grimaced as she felt another hard kick aimed at her swollen belly.

“Okay. I have Barton with me, expect him as well. And if you will situate snipers on a higher floor, I believe we’re being followed and I don’t want to lose Parker, and by extension, this deal with Stark...” Coulson pauses for a moment. “Will I see you by any chance Pepper?”

Pepper blinked back a couple of tears and released another tense breath before breathing in sharply to answer Coulson’s inquiry.

“I’m not sure. I’ll be sure to visit if you happen to stick around though... Give me ten minutes to sort this out... and if Tony gives you any trouble have him call me in and I’ll make my way down to sort it out. Goodness knows that man has a flair for dramatics. And don’t provoke him, please,” she rolled her eyes with a huff, “I know how you are around him. Don’t try to take over, just listen to him and do what he says. I don’t need him killing you again, because we can really use your help. And Peter’s there... I don’t want him to see something like that so young.”

Coulson chuckles. “Sure thing Pepper. I’ll see you in a few I suppose.”

Pepper smiles and her breath wavers slightly before she hangs up. She drops the phone onto the mess of blankets and rolls to her side to hug a pillow close to her face, breathing in and out using the practiced breathing exercises Bruce had coached her and Tony on a month ago. She groans when she feels another sharp kick, then growls.

“You better be the cutest damn baby I’ve ever seen in my whole goddamn life or your Daddy’s gonna have hell to pay when this is all over.”

“Boss! Boss-Tony! B-Boss!” Both Peter and Tony startled when Harley stumbled into his office with a crazed look in his eyes and heavy breaths pushing his chest up and down. He was supposed to be studying up on some work Tony had given him so he didn’t fall behind in school and Tony just knew that the kid’s panic wasn’t because he had a question on the (home)school-work.

“What’s wrong Kid?” Tony questioned with a worried quirk of his brow. He wrapped one arm tightly around Peter’s front and stands from his chair so the tiny child is lifted along with him. Harley was already at his side, tugging on his other arm insistently by the time he was standing to his full height.

“Hydra’s here,” He whispered through a heavy breath, body tucking closer towards Tony on instinct.

“What?!” Tony snaps, eyes bugging out from his skull as he shoves the boy behind him as he reaches for the gun he had hidden in his desk drawer. The enhanced revolver was extremely intuitive, but he still hadn’t wanted Peter getting his hands on it while they were reading. He drops Peter onto his chair a bit rough and he rolls it behind him with a kick of his foot so his body is shielding both Peter and Harley from whatever walks through his office door next. He listens quietly for a few seconds but hears no footsteps. Then, his mind slows down and he’s instantly hit with the realization that JARVIS hadn’t spoken a word on the matter.

“JARVIS?” Tony questions, voice loud and authoritative without ever breaking his glare directed towards the door.

There are a couple of heavy seconds of silence before an alternative voice rings out in his office.

“Master JARVIS has been momentarily disabled, Boss,” FRIDAY announces monotonously. Tony releases a long string of curses under his breath and he can feel his heart picking up speed when he’s hit with the sudden realization that they must be under some sort of attack and he has no plan. His backup AI was still a work-in-progress. Her coding was heavy with glitches and she didn’t have near as much experience as JARVIS did, which meant no ability to process and produce reliable output. Tony rarely used her without JARVIS supervising her coding within their own computer programming... FRIDAY *depended* on JARVIS. Tony depended on JARVIS.

“Did anyone follow you?” Tony eventually asks, finally turning his attention towards Harley, who was sadly the only source for information he had at the moment.

“I-I-I don’t know,” Harley stammered, pupils blown wide with panic as he ran a frantic hands through his hair. “I-I just saw that Shield dude, and I knew Shield turned to Hydra, and-and I just came and got you. Everyone was-was running everywhere and everything, and-and JARVIS wouldn’t answer and everyone was freaking out!”

“FRIDAY? Where are Rhodey and Happy?” He asked hopefully, shooting one last wary glance towards the door before nodding his head up to glance at the ceiling. It took several moments for the AI to process the question because she was about as stupid as Siri and Tony found himself quickly growing impatient.

“Sir Rhodes and Ms. Romanoff are escorting Mr. Phil Coulson to your office as we speak, Boss.” She eventually answered.

“Rhodey’s Hydra?” Harley gasped, hand shooting directly towards his mouth to gnaw at his nails.

Tony deflated a little in relief. He didn’t know what he was planning to do if Hydra had decided to invade his property. “No, there has to be another reasonable explanation. Alarms should have gone off and *you* shouldn’t be the only one rushing into my office if this were a real invasion... Thank goodness.” He tucks his gun into the waistband of his pants and jabs two fingers into the side of the overhang of his desk with a grimace. A tabled selection of knives immediately spins out from the rim of his desk with the leverage from Tony’s fingers. He holsters two inside his jacket with practiced speed. Then he spins towards Harley and frowns at his anxious expression. He hurriedly swats the kid’s hand away from his mouth and reaches down to scoop up Peter, who was very near to tears, arms lifted towards Tony insistently. “Take Pete, and go to your room. Lock the door and shut off the lights and hide. Don’t use the elevator; use the stairs. I’m not comfortable with Peter out in the open with an active, unknown threat, and you need to take care of him. I don’t want either of you coming out of there until I come and get you. Do I make myself clear?”

“But I can help-” Harley hurriedly interjects, though his confidence is easily transparent with the way his shoulders convulse nervously. Tony really hated having to deal with Harley’s constant insistence that he was capable, that he could help, that he was old enough, strong enough, brave enough to do what needed to be done. Tony hated that. He really, really hated it.

Tony narrows his eyes threateningly, pulling Peter against him so he can press a finger into Harley’s chest, ensuring to word his next command in a way that would appeal. He didn’t have time to argue the usual, overused “*because I said so,*” or “*You aren’t capable, you aren’t old enough, and you need to be protected,*” because none of those arguments ever ended quickly or gracefully anymore. Not since the kid had grown a pair of balls big enough to challenge him at every turn. “Do what you’re told, Kid. This is an important job that I don’t even entrust to some of my most capable men. I trust you to take care of him, and that’s what I need you to do. If something happens, I need to know there’s someone levelheaded enough to protect him if the need arises. Now... do you think I can trust you with that?”

“Yessir,” Harley nods, eager to prove himself. He reaches out, ready to take Peter into his arms and dash out the room... but it was too late.

“Hey-hey-hey! You can’t just barge in there!” He hears Rhodey roar as the doors to his office is thrown open with a violent bang.

Tony acts immediately on instinct, moving with precision and practice as if he were seeing everything in slow motion. He reaches one arm out beside him as he spins, shoving Harley behind him with such force the kid nearly trips over his own feet as he stumbles backward. His defensive body position immediately follows, arm reaching behind his back for his gun. His arm extends to aim towards the man, Peter tucked as close as possible into his side, ensuring to shield his small body with his own by exposing his empty side to the intruder. Peter’s head jerks, face immediately diving to press into the side of Tony’s neck as his shoulders quake softly in fear. Tony bares his teeth, using his thumb to release the safety of his pistol, aiming the muzzle right between the eyes of Phil Coulson himself.

“There’s no time,” the man responds stoically, staring Tony down with that stupid look he hated so much. Tony instantly recalled why he found such joy killing the man. He hadn’t had enough time to crop out the shit-eating grin off the man’s face with his knife at the time... but now that he thinks back... he should have taken the time.

“What the hell’s going on here?” Tony snarled, subtly petting the back of Peter’s neck, down his back, when he felt the tears fall onto his neck.

Coulson raises his hands defensively, bowing his head in a quick act of submission. “I’m only here to make a deal with you Stark.”

Tony lifted his chin in defiance and tightened his grip on Peter like he was scared Coulson was there to take him away. He could feel the vibrations at the back of his jaw as he unconsciously ground his teeth together in an attempt to contain his frustration. He had never been a big fan of Phil Coulson, long before he ever laid his hands on Pepper.

“What do you want you bastard?” He asked. He adjusted his shoulder uncomfortably when he noticed Coulson eyeing the kid hugging his neck tightly.

“Yeah. Why’re you here?” Harley butted in rudely, stepping forward. He narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest as he stared venomously at Coulson.

“Harley,” Tony reprimanded under his breath with a quiet sigh, but it was no use. The kid had been somewhat out of control lately, determined to prove his rank and earn the respect from the other men and women around the Tower. “We don’t work with Hydra dude.”

Tony refrained from rolling his eyes, but he got a clear view of Rhodey giving into the biggest eye-roll of the century. For some reason that seemed to lighten Tony's mood... only slightly. He always found Rhodey's annoyance immensely gratifying.

He placed his gun down on the desk slowly and reached out to press his palm against Harley's chest, effectively pushing him to stand behind him once more and nonverbally scolding him to 'shut the hell up'.

"I'm sorry about him." He directed the forced apology towards Coulson.

"Why're you sorry?!" Harley sounded offended, pushing against Tony's hand so he could settle the man with his glare and point an accusatory finger at Coulson. "He's a Nazi!"

Peter sobbed loud and hard against him at that, and Tony grit his teeth in anger as he glared down at the defiant boy. Thankfully Coulson spoke up before Tony had the chance to lose his cool in front of a room full of unwanted witnesses.

"We're not Hydra," He answered simply with an amused quirk of his mouth. "We're Shield."

Tony grit his teeth together at that too. "Sorry to burst your bubble buddy. But around here those two are one and the same. Your guy Fury is dead, and he corrupted your people. He left you with no successors. There is no Shield anymore; only Hydra. So unless you have something useful to say, I'd suggest you say it before I blow your brains all over my wall. It's in need of a new paint job anyway."

He felt a nervous shiver run down Peter's spine, and the skin on his neck tingled when Peter's fists tightened on his collar... he realized it may have been smart to use a better choice of words when there were young, innocent ears listening in.

"I was his right-hand," Coulson answered without a second thought, and Tony hated how difficult it was to get a read on him. "I'm his successor. Hydra wasn't part of my or Fury's plan, and what's left of Shield is set on fixing what went terribly wrong. I know that you share those same feelings as I, Mr. Stark. Your father was directly involved with both Shield and Hydra; that cannot just be a coincidence and you know it. Just like you, our mission is to establish a safe, tolerant world with people who follow our rules and Hydra has corrupted far more than what we can imagine. They've killed thousands of people and are planning on killing millions more. Hydra has broken every single one of your rules Mr. Stark. I want to know what you're going to do about it, and I want to

help.”

Tony takes a quick glance at Harley and he clicked his teeth together twice before responding.

“What do you need from me? And what do you have to offer? You better not have walked in here empty-handed.”

“I don’t need anything from you,” Coulson smirked, “it’s you who needs something from me.”

Tony laughs outright at that. Low, guttural and distinct. His pupils dilated dangerously as he fixed his menacing gaze on the man. “Ha! And what makes you say that?”

The man’s confidence didn’t waver. “Your wife contacted me. She told me everything.”

Tony’s face turns red. He spun and dropped Peter into his office chair roughly, ignoring the boy’s cry of surprise as Tony quickly rounded the desk. He marched forward until he was toe to toe with the man. He felt his throat tighten and tremble with repressed rage as he whispered darkly.

“What did you just say?” He growled with bared teeth, shoving the man hard enough to make him stumble back, and toeing up to him again.

“I said that your wife contacted me,” Coulson responded without hesitation. He frowned in annoyance as he made a show of brushing off the lapels of his jacket where Tony had pushed him. “She explained everything to me.”

“I told you to stay away from her!” Tony’s voice thundered. Hand lifting to circle around the man’s throat. Coulson didn’t so much as flinch and Tony’s nostrils flared as another growl escaped from the back of his throat. “And the last time you didn’t listen you nearly killed her.” He spat the words through his teeth.

“It wasn’t *me* who almost killed her,” Coulson answered smoothly, eyebrows furrowing to challenge Tony’s glare.

“Shut up!” Tony bellowed, releasing his hold on Coulson’s throat. He stepped back for the perfect vantage to throw his fist at the man’s face.

Coulson blocked the sloppy punch easily, and Tony roared in frustration, but it didn’t deter him. It didn’t take much more than a few well-placed jabs to the ribs and an elbow to the jaw before he had Coulson dazed enough to pin his arms behind his back. Tony shoved Coulson against his office wall, using his left hand to push against Coulson’s head so his face was pressed into the wall. Tony’s own body pressed up against his back, right arm lifted to hold the knife dangerously against the man’s jugular.

“Give me a reason right now not to slit your throat so I can watch you bleed out on my floor,” Tony whispered threateningly into his ear, pulling the blade close enough to draw blood. Coulson didn’t flinch; he simply jerked against Tony’s close hold, only to be stopped by the weight of the larger man’s body pressing against him.

“There are children watching.” He sounded smug, and Tony almost gave into the urge and slashed his throat right there, but of course, Coulson was smart and he called his bluff. He wasn’t about to kill a man in cold blood in front of Peter or Harley. They shouldn’t ever see something like that.

Tony released him, but not without a rough shove into the wall, and he took a quick glance at the two kids behind his desk, taking several steps away from the man to remove himself from the situation. Peter was now curled in Harley’s arms. Harley was watching them intently, stock still. Tony cursed under his breath. But even though Harley may have been actively watching, Tony’s anger was still raging like a rabid dog inside his chest and he just had to do *something*. So, he spun back around and tossed his knife at the wall with an easy flick of his wrist, effectively pinning Coulson to the wall by his hand.

“Gaah!” Coulson cried out in a high-pitched wail, filling Tony with a deep sense of satisfaction as he watched the thick stream of blood pour from the man’s hand in large rivulets of red crimson sheening against the light. “You Bitch!” It was nice to finally see something other than indifference and confidence on the man’s face; it being in pain and anger just further fueled Tony’s gratification.

“Next time don’t piss me off,” Tony grinned wickedly. He nodded at Natasha and she eagerly jumped forward to help Coulson with his injury... apparently, she was still loyal to Shield in some ways and Tony frowned at the thought. He knew she wasn’t with Hydra, but it was hard to know if she was still with Shield. “Now, if you don’t want me to put a bullet in both your kneecaps next, I’d hurry along and explain to me *exactly* what you think you’re doing on my property.”

Natasha pulled the knife from his hand with one swift tug, causing the man to cry out in pain once

more, and she hurried to begin wrapping the bleeding hand in a discarded cloth. By that time, he was breathing heavily, and his eyelids were drooping tiredly from the blood loss.

“Hydra’s out for us. They were exposed sooner than they would have liked and they weren’t able to clean us out all the way. There’s a good hundred of us left, but against Hydra, we don’t stand a chance; not with the numbers they’re raking in. We know things... and they don’t want it getting out and we have technology hidden away in old bases that they want.”

“So you’re coming to me for protection?” Tony smiled patronizingly. “How sweet of you to trust me.”

This time Coulson glared at him. “Shut up Stark. You need the help as much as we do.”

Tony scoffed. “Oh please.”

“Hydra’s looking for you. Ross is looking for you. Oscorp is looking for you. Ten Rings. Society. The UN. Everyone of power wants you dead. Need I go on?”

“I don’t see how you’re supposed to help with that,” Tony informed, raising an eyebrow. “You have less manpower than what my father lent me when I was 5.”

“You need men Stark. All the men you can get and you know that better than anyone else. My guys are experienced and I can trust them, what about your new guys? Not so experienced. Not much you can trust them with. It’s not hard to see that you’re practically grasping at strings to stay afloat.” He shot a pointed look behind him at Harley, and Tony turned as well to look. The kid was pale, and all of a sudden Tony felt a pit of guilt start eating away at his stomach.

“Hey, Kid. Why don’t you and Pete go to your room while I-”

“No, Stark. I think it’s best they stay.”

“No,” Tony snapped vehemently, “you don’t get a say on my decisions. You came to *me* . If you want my protection, you listen to *me* . I’m the boss, and you don’t question that. Understood?”

“Whatever you say Stark,” Coulson shrugged, that stupid indifferent smile returning. “I just think Peter should be here when I give my peace offering.”

Tony narrowed his eyes at Coulson and backed away, towards the two kids. He flicked his hand at Rhodey and Happy in a silent signal to watch Coulson, and both men silently snaked up to stand on either side of him.

“You okay, Kid?” Tony asked in a lowered voice. He dropped his hands to Harley’s shoulder and squeezed gently.

“Uh, y-yeah-yeah. I just- I’m not really used to seeing stuff like that anymore, I guess. K-Kinda gross honestly,” he stuttered out, bouncing and rocking to try and soothe Peter, who seemed to have significantly calmed down.

“I’m sorry,” Tony apologized through gritted teeth. “How’s he doing?” He nodded towards Peter and hesitantly reached out a hand towards his soft curls before thinking better of it and lowering his arm.

“He’s doing better. I think he was just startled by all the commotion at first.”

“Okay,” Tony nodded solemnly. “You can leave if you-”

“No-no-no it’s cool. I’m not bothered by that stuff. I’ve-I’ve seen it all before. It was just weird with... y’know... *you* doing it. You don’t really do that kinda stuff in front of me.”

“And I shouldn’t,” Tony corrected with a sigh, “but I don’t plan on much more violence, so if you really wanna stay I don’t mind I suppose... it shouldn’t last much longer than another couple minutes... but if I’m ‘bout to shoot him I’m gonna send you two out of here and you better be up and out before I lose my patience.”

At that, Peter picked his head up to look at Tony through his wide, puffy eyes.

“Is he bad man?”

Tony faltered. “Umm,” he pursed his lips in thought. “Yes and no.”

“How can it be yes an’ no?” He asked innocently, cocking his little head of curls to the side in confusion with a small snuffle.

“Well,” Tony smiled, “that’s a mystery adults are still figuring out kiddo. Now Harley, why don’t you sit.” He guided Harley to sit down at his desk chair and the kid’s eyebrows rose in surprise as he looked down at the chair. The Boss’ chair... he was about to sit in his Boss’ chair.

“Whoah,” he breathed, smiling giddily to himself as he looked between the arms of the chair before sinking into the cushions and getting comfortable with Peter in his lap. He adjusted Peter into a more comfortable position, legs sprawled over either of his thighs with his face tucked into Harley’s neck, and Tony chuckled. He reached out to ruffle both kids’ hair, finishing each time with a slow rake through the wild curls both boys donned.

“We do ABC when you done?” Peter asked, peeking up at him with a shy smile.

“Of course Bug,” Tony smiled, smoothing back the curls that had fallen against his forehead one last time so he could press a quick kiss to his hairline. “Then we’ll whip out some more Dr. Seuss.”

He heard Coulson clear his throat from across the room. “If you’re done schmoozing with Richard Parker’s kid, I’d like to continue.”

Tony sighed deeply and cast a glance at Harley.

“Y’know, I might end up shooting him. He’s already pissing me off again. Be ready.” Harley laughed and Tony smiled at the sound, turning back around to approach Coulson.

“Okay, what’s so urgent?”

“I’d just like confirmation. My guys are out in the open and the longer we put this off, the more chance Hydra has at marking them off. Believe it or not, but I care about the lives of each and every one of my men.”

Tony stayed silent, bowing his head in thought.

“And Pepper spoke to you?”

“Yes. She asked me to come in and make a deal with you... confirm it with her if you need...”
Coulson trails off and Tony looks up to narrow his eyes at him.

“I feel like you’re leaving out some very important information here. Pepper wouldn’t make a deal like this with you unless she knew you had something of value to offer us beyond a hundred men.”

Coulson didn’t say anything, but Tony spotted the look he shared with Natasha. He didn’t like that look, and he narrowed his eyes at the woman he’d come to trust... slightly.

“Romanoff, have something to share?”

“Pepper knew I needed help finding Parker.”

“You have Parker.” Tony immediately discerned fervently, taking steps that brought him close enough to be nose to nose with her. “Where is he?”

“He’s outside,” Coulson stated, stepping towards them. “Barton’s watching him. He assisted in the retrieval. I couldn’t risk my only means of leverage before I spoke with you directly.”

Before Tony was even able to give the order, his office door was being thrown open again as Hogan urgently ushered Barton and his bound prisoner into the room.

Tony couldn’t even describe the all-encompassing feeling of giddiness that flooded through him. His fingers twitched in anticipation and he could feel the menacing teeth-bared grin that split across his face as he watched Richard Parker stumble into the room with his mouth gagged, eyes blindfolded, and his hands tied behind his back. Tony momentarily forgot about the Parker child across the room as he rushed upon the man to tug the gag from his mouth and the handkerchief from around his eyes so he could bask in the pitiful terror the man emoted when they locked eyes.

“S-Stark,” he breathed with a nervous hitch while trying to maintain some semblance of valor, but Tony wasn’t fooled. He watched as Barton kicked the back of his legs and the man fell to his knees in front of him.

“Parker,” he responded eagerly, smiling down joyfully at the man as if he were greeting a long-lost best friend, “I have no words to express how happy I am to see you... kneeling here in front of me... I can already see the beautiful picture I’ll be able to paint on my floor with your blood.” He ran a teasing finger along the side of the man’s face, tracing the outline of his jaw, and Richard jerked away from the touch with a choked breath.

Tony didn’t have time to continue his invasive ministrations, because then he heard a struggle, an urgent shout of ‘Peter no!’ and then the pitter-patter of familiar little feet. His heart stopped and his lungs leaped into his throat. *Peter was still here.*

“Dad-Daddy?”

“Peter!” Richard called out eagerly through a release of breath when he spotted his son running towards them. “Peter! Thank god you’re okay.” His hands were tied behind his back, thank goodness, because if he would have laid a hand on Peter Tony didn’t think he’d be able to refrain from pummeling him into the carpet, despite any hesitation of doing it in front of the man’s son.

“Dad?” Peter slowed considerably as he crept closer, focusing in on his father with a wary gaze like he wasn’t really sure it was him. Tony felt frozen in place as he watched helplessly while Richard gently coaxed his son to come closer.

“Peter c’mere.” He pleaded desperately. “It’s okay. C’mere baby. What’s wrong? Did he hurt you? Are you okay?”

Peter stared at him with furrowed eyebrows to express his little-boy confusion.

“Why you here? You takin’ me back?”

“Yes!” Richard grinned, huffing out a relieved chuckle as he cast a worried look in Tony’s direction. “Yes, I can bring you home. You just have to tell Stark that you want to come home with me. Tell him I’m a good Dad and that this is all just a big misunderstanding. Okay?”

The room was heavy with the loudest silence Tony's ever experienced as Peter mulled over his father's instructions. Tony felt his saliva thicken and he couldn't swallow... because Peter was looking at him with a question in his eyes like Tony held all the answers to the questions he may ever have.

"Peter tell him," Richard urged desperately, but Peter didn't spare him another glance. He just looked up at Tony with a wobbly lip and furrowed brows.

"Tony?"

Tony's teeth clenched together tightly, and words spilled from his mouth before he could stop himself. "If you want to go home Peter, I'll let you and your Dad go." He couldn't just... He couldn't just tear Peter away from his father like this if Peter didn't want him to. Especially not when the little boy very well knew what Tony intended to do with him, and for once Tony hated that Peter was so amazingly smart. He just... He can't handle the thought of Peter resenting him. He can't-He can't make this decision for him if it meant that both he and Peter will both lose in the end either way if he decided for him.

Peter's expression melted into something between horror and disbelief. "Can I come see PepPep tho. An-and Ha'ley, and Happy, and Whodey, an-an... and *you* ?"

"No," Tony said, deciding to go with the truth. "Because if I ever see your father again, I won't be letting him go a second time."

"Oh," Peter paused, dropping his eyes to stare at his feet. "'Cause he's bad?"

Tony didn't answer right away. For some reason, telling a child that their father was a bad person seemed like crossing a line. "You tell me Peter."

He knew it was wrong... practically forcing a child to decide whether his father deserved to be killed. He just- He couldn't... He couldn't just let Peter walk out of here with that man without at least *trying* ...

Peter looked up at him and his mouth opened to answer, but then it closed again. He turned to look at his father who seemed to be close to tears while insisting repeatedly through murmured whimpers that Peter tell Tony to let them go.

“Dad...Daddy?” Peter started slowly, studying his father seriously.

“What is it Peter?” Richard sighed breathlessly, looking at his son in a way he had probably never looked at him before. “Anything Peter. Anything you want, I’ll get it for you. Just tell Tony to let us go so we can go home.”

Peter didn’t seem to care about that. He cocked his head to the side and looked at his father with an odd mixture of dark innocence lingering behind clouded eyes.

“Did you kill Mama?”

“What?” Richard nearly squeaked, voice breaking with a choke. He shuffled closer to Peter on his knees. “No-no-no, I told you I didn’t Peter. It was Stark,” he nodded at Tony. “I told you he was the one that killed your Mama, that’s why we have to go, or else he’ll kill me and you too.”

“He won’t kill me!” Peter insisted defensively, hands forming into tight fists at his side. Then he released his fists and the anger was quickly clouded over with a despondent frown of pity. His eyes darkened as he stared at his father stoically. “An’ he didn’t kill Mama.” He shook his head sagely. “He don’t kill good peop’e. Only the bad. Mama wasn’t bad. Are you bad? Did you kill Mama?”

Richard shook his head wretchedly, shuffling even closer towards his son, but Peter took a step back and narrowed his eyes menacingly. “Did you kill her?!” He insisted a little more harshly, with an assertive raise to his voice. Tony found it terrible to watch the innocent baby he knew form into this intense ball of hostility. There was no compassion, no cutesy words, or a reassuring smile. It was anger and hate and a lifetime of pent up wickedness that had been festering through learned behavior and a lack of love. It was cold and dark and Tony hated it. He detested it.

And with a quick glance around the room, he knew he wasn’t the only one.

“No Peter,” Richard repeated adamantly. “I didn’t kill her.”

“I saw you,” Peter whispered into the silent room, officially shutting the blubbering man up with the single statement. “I saw you do it. Tell me that you did it.”

“Petey I told you, baby... that was just a dream,” Richard plead, tears shining in his eyes. “Listen to me. It was just a dream. I didn’t kill your Mama. So just tell Tony to let us go and this will all be

over. We can go back home and I'll get you a new Mama. Just tell Tony you want to go home with me."

"No."

"Peter!" Richard shouted, causing the boy to stumble back by the uproar. "Peter!! PETER! No! No PETER!!"

Tears pooled from both Parkers' eyes. Tony was quick to shut the man up with a quick kick in the ribs before he rushed to scoop Peter up in his arms. Peter gladly reached for him and curled into his arms for comfort.

"STARK!" Richard screamed, red in the face by the strength of his screeching, "You asshole! You brainwashed my son! GIVE ME BACK MY SON!"

Tony didn't hesitate to kick him even harder in the gut. "Gag him." He instructed darkly, nodding towards Barton and the man rushed forward to do as instructed, but not before Harley came rushing forward with steam pouring from his ears and fire behind his eyes as tears poured down his cheeks.

"You bastard!" Harley screamed, throwing his fist into the man's face. "You fucking bastard!!" He kicked and punched and kicked until he felt the heavy weight of Tony's hand dragging him away by the shoulder. "You sick evil bastard! You killed his mother?!"

"Hey," Tony shushed, "sh-sh-sh," pulling him away from the scene as Barton struggled to force the gag back into the man's mouth through his shrieks and howls.

Then, of course, in the midst of all the chaos, Pepper came sweeping in with her skirt billowing along behind her. Her lips were coated in a dark red, pursed and downcast. A wave of dark anger emanated from her, brushing her cheeks with a bright red to match her hair as her eyes fixated on the thrashing man Barton had, grasped by the hairs on his head.

Peter was tucked closely into one of Tony's shoulders, and Harley was sobbing heavily into his other, frustrated tears pooling onto his jacket. He squeezed both boys tight and watched as his wife flicked open the knife in her hand. She ignored them and approached Richard with a purposeful stride. The man continued thrashing angrily against Barton as she came to a stop in front of him and Tony watched her silently. Barton bared his teeth as he strained to detain the man by tugging

on his hair harshly to draw his head back, allowing Pepper the perfect vantage to tower over him. She stared down at him with a blank frown, hair falling over her shoulders to frame her face and tickle Richard's cheeks as she held the sharp point of her knife to rest underneath the tip of his chin. Parker's eyes were blown wide as his entire body heaved with his heavy, panicked breaths.

She leaned forward slowly and whispered something too soft for anyone else to hear into his ear... Tony still didn't move to stop her. Then, while she was pulling away, she pressed a lingering kiss to the man's cheek, leaving a dark imprint of her red lipstick before she pulled away and smiled down at him with fluttering lids. She raised her other hand to trace a brightly painted nail down the length of his jaw, pausing momentarily to brush the pad of her thumb over the mark of her lips she had left on his cheek. And without a single stutter of movement, she lifted her knife swiftly to slash across his cheek, cutting perfectly through the small gap between the lips she had painted onto his skin. His blood poured from the cut, coating the knife she propped beneath his jaw and she smiled softly at him, stroking his untouched cheek.

Then, she grasped his chin gently between her fingers and tipped his head back to look up at her. He did. Terrified and afraid, but he looked her dead in the eye.

"I wish you the worst my dear," she purred gently, leaning down to press another lingering kiss to his forehead. Once again leaving the perfect mark of her lips behind before she releases his chin and drops the blood-coated knife, allowing it to clatter to the floor beside him.

That's when she turned away and hurried her way towards Tony and the boys, face falling in worry, already reaching out towards them.

"Hey," she soothed softly, joining Tony's hand in rubbing Harley's back. "It's okay sweetie. C'mere."

Harley gravitated towards her, allowing himself to be coddled in Pepper's arms, and Tony adjusted to be attentive towards Peter, making sure Richard had a clear view as he comforted his son.

"Hey, Pete, look at me, would'ya." His hand combed through his messy brown curls and Peter's snotty, puffy face pulled away from his shoulder to stare at him blankly. Tony smiled softly and cupped his cheek gently. "Tell me what you want, baby. Tell me and I'll do it. Whatever you want."

Peter's lip jutted out and wobbled sadly before a scowl broke across his face. More tears soon followed.

“He’s bad,” Peter stated firmly with a shaky voice. “So bad.”

“He kill’t my Mama. Kill him too... please?”

Chapter End Notes

Lemme know what you think. This has been the most intense chapter so far and... yeah. And before anyone decides to attack me, keep in mind that this is an AU, a Criminal AU, which means some people will be kinda... evil... which means Peter might be sweet but he's also a little dark... so just keep that in mind.

Gimme thoughts on Richard, cuz I want to get his characterization right in future chapters. And let me know if there's something that should probably be fixed.

So, yeah, I like to hear from you guys, it's kinda nice. :)

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Warning!! There is a graphic description of torture in this chapter... and the situation may be very uncomfortable for some readers. So, please be cautious.

Also, don't attack me please. Thanks

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony didn't know how to describe the feeling that encompassed him after Peter's shy declaration. His gut swirled with excitement when Richard cried out with a muffled sob, squirming violently in an attempt to escape Baron's tight hold. He felt a small smile edge across the corners of his mouth, but it quickly fell back into a frown. A shuddered breath was puffed out across the skin on his neck and he shuddered when he felt the distinct vibration of Peter's shiver as the boy tucked himself back into his shoulder with a small sob. Peter shuddered violently, little hands taut as he gripped the fabric of Tony's jacket, releasing and grabbing continuously in an attempt to draw himself further into the comforting hold.

That made Tony scowl, and his bull-headed anger returned full force with the urge to crack every bone in Richard Parker's body, one by one, until he admitted to Peter the terrible things he had done to him, and apologized. But instead of doing that, he rocked his body side to side gently, humming quietly as he leaned his cheek against the side of Peter's head, reaching up one hand to pet the boy's hair.

The moment was interrupted by Richard's muffled shouts coming to an abrupt halt as Coulson pressed the point of his knife to the bridge of the man's nose, directly between his two eyes. Coulson rolled his own eyes at the man's dramatics then turned to look back at Tony, Pepper, and the boys, waving his hand in a gesture to continue.

Tony nodded his head gratefully at him and pressed against Peter's head gently when the boy attempted to look up at what had caused his father's sudden silence.

"Shh, baby," Tony soothed, returning to petting the boy's hair gently as he coaxed the child into relaxing.

Pepper looked over at Tony with Harley's head tucked into her neck, body curled around her protruding abdomen, and her strong arms wrapped around his lanky body. She gave Tony a pointed look before giving Harley one last squeeze and letting go.

"I'm going to take them upstairs to cool down..." she stepped closer to them, holding out her arms

to take Peter, but Tony shook his head, spinning his body away from her to pull Peter out of her path.

He fixed her with a stern expression of his own. “I don’t think so, Pep. There are a few things that I feel still need to be taken care of.” He jostled his shoulder and Peter lifted his head to look up at him, but Tony kept a strong hand braced on the side of his neck to ensure the kid wouldn’t be able to look behind him. “Hey, Buddy,” Tony’s thumb stretched up to brush away a couple of tears that had fallen, “would it make you feel any better if your Dad told you the truth before... before you don’t see him again?”

Peter’s mouth opened slightly as he thought about it, then he snapped it shut and nodded his head shyly before leaning back into Tony for comfort, forehead dropping to rest against his stubbly chin. Tony kissed him in response, because after the past few weeks with the kid, it was easy to tell what he wanted when he did things like that. Peter’s arms wrapped around his neck in response.

“Tony no,” Pepper began with a stern shake of her head, “he shouldn’t hear or see something like that ever. That’s why I intervened when I did. He’s too young to experience something like that.” She moved to grab Peter once more, but, again, Tony moved out of the way.

“I have noise-canceling headphones in my top drawer... and I’ll have Happy cover his eyes... He needs closure Pep. Trust me, I know. If he doesn’t hear it from his father now, he’s going to doubt himself, me, and his decision for the rest of his life. This is what I do Pepper. Take Harley and then come back for Peter. Hopefully, this won’t take very long and we can move on to helping him pretend this never happened.”

Pepper’s scowl drips into a worried frown, staring at Peter as Tony pressed two more kisses against the kid’s hairline before carding his hand through his curls.

“Wait-wait,” Harley perks up, stepping into the conversation with his arms crossed over his chest confidently. “If Peter stays, I wanna stay too.”

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. I only have one pair of headphones,” Tony answered softly with a gentle shake of his head.

“I can handle it! I don’t need stupid headphones. I’ve heard a man scream before.” Harley argued defiantly, rubbing at his cheeks to get rid of any residue tears from earlier. His cheeks were still red and puffy, and his scowl only defined his obvious distress. “I’m fine. Lemme stay. I need closure too.”

Tony sees something akin to jealousy flicker across the kid's face when he risked a small glance between Peter and Tony. Then, before he knows what's happening, tears begin pooling from the kid's eyes once more and Tony's frown is forming into an understanding smile. He takes a single step forward and cups Harley's cheek a bit roughly to wipe away a fresh tear. Harley's scowl disappears and he drops his gaze to look down at his feet in embarrassment. Tony frowns and chucks him under the chin.

"Hey, look at me."

Harley obeys and his eyes flicker up to look at Tony, and in that moment, Tony was again reminded of how young Harley really was. Despite how much the kid insisted he was grown up... he wasn't. He was a kid who had never, a day in his life, been allowed to be a kid. He's always been the adult, always looking out for someone, seen more violence than most men, felt more fear and guilt than most humans, and Tony pities him. The first time in his life the kid's offered a chance to be what he is... a kid... and he's too stuck in his ways, too stubborn and too independent to admit he actually needs that dependence and stability. Tony would have killed for the same opportunity he's offering the child in front of him... but then again, killing a man isn't very far out of the ordinary for him... He'd give anything to be something-- anything-- else than what he's become. Anything for a chance at normalcy... Anything for a choice... a chance... but it's too late for him.

It's not too late for Harley... or Peter.

"What are you not telling me kid?" Tony paused, waiting for an answer, but Harley didn't offer him one. "Is this really about Richard? Or... is it your own dad?" Another tear and Tony wiped that one away too. Pepper quickly jumped in as well, combing through the kid's hair with nimble fingers, bracing a hand on the side of the kid's head to guide him to lie against her chest. Harley's only response was a strangled whimper.

"Hey, listen," Tony smiled, dropping his hand to the kid's shoulder to squeeze it reassuringly. "We'll talk about what to do with your dad later. But you shouldn't be here. Peter really shouldn't be either, but he needs to be. Okay?"

"But-but I'm old enough," Harley continued to argue, pulling away from Pepper abruptly and wrenching backward so Tony's hand falls from his shoulder. His face puckers up with another scowl as he tried to hold back the oncoming tears. "I-I can handle it. I'm fine."

"I know you can," Tony smiled with a sigh, "but I don't want you to have to. Okay?"

There was a long moment of silence and Tony was suddenly acutely aware of the audience around them. He jolted to attention, back straight and softened face melting away just as the kid nodded and leaned back into Pepper.

“Great. I’ll see you later tonight...if you want maybe you can stay in the penthouse tonight ... we can watch a movie or somethin’. Your pick. That good?”

Harley looked at him again with a teary smile. “Yeah,” he smiled tightly, “Yeah, sounds great.”

“Alright. See ya later Kid. Be good for Pepper.”

The fact that Peter had barely flinched at the idea of his father being tortured for the sake of his own desires kind of bothered Tony. Yeah, he knew the kid wasn’t really emotionally attached to the man, but... still. It felt so wrong to see Peter bounce easily in his seat with a much-too-large pair of headphones on his head and Happy’s hands over his eyes while Tony busied himself slicing the man open in one place after another right in front of his son. It was dark and wrong; something that reminded him far too much of his own father and his insistence that Tony sat in on these important “meetings”. Although, then, he wasn’t granted the privilege of soothing music and warm hands to block out the blood-curdling screams and the long string of blood that prickled to the surface of pale skin, following a trail made by the sharp edges of a knife.

Before they had even started, Tony had Barton and Rhodey clean off Richard’s face where Pepper had done her part with the knife. The less blood Peter was exposed to, the better he’d feel about the idea of having the child in the room as he tortured his father. And, of course, he refrained from harming Richard anywhere above the collarbone. He had assumed that short slices along his ribcage and abdomen would suffice, but the man was stubborn and his mouth had remained glued shut... So, Tony knew he had to get a bit more creative for this next round.

“Alright, Pete. Ears and Eyes please,” Tony sighed once more when Richard growled in annoyance, glancing over at the kid perched on his desk. Tony really didn’t think it should be so hard to make a man *apologize* to his son, but here he still stood, with Richard’s hair fisted in his hand after another short opportunity to allow the man to admit what he had done. Tony really hated that the kid was already so familiar with the drill, sitting there as if nothing of importance was going on, anger replaced with what seemed to be a blank slate of faux innocence and calm to unconsciously protect him from this trama. Happy stood behind him, adjusting the headphones to cover his ears once more before reaching around to cover the kid’s eyes with his own hands. Tony *hated* that this had lasted long enough for Peter to become so familiar.

“Last chance Parker,” Tony warned, towering over him, wearing an irritated scowl.

“Screw you, Stark.” He rasped through a gasped breath, spitting on Tony’s shoe. Really, Tony should commend him. For the pussy-like persona he put on earlier, the man had guts. Not many men dared to spit on his shoes while he was in the midst of torturing them.

“I’m more into girls, sorry Buddy.” Tony laughed at his own joke, reaching behind the man to grab one of his tied up hands. There was a long pause as Tony glanced around the room that had been cleared out. Only Rhodey and Happy remained... and he smiled as he turned to look back down at Richard, faces a bit too close as he whispered. “Have you ever realized how dark the little piggy rhyme is?” He asked conversationally, fingering Parker’s index finger with faux curiosity. “It’s really quite a terrible thing to chant to your children so young. It seems so innocent at first,” he mused with a sigh, “and it’s not until your older, already torn down by life, that you realize the true meaning of what had, at the time, seemed to be so... okay... Death, cannibalism, and... *torture* if you really think about it.” he jutted out his lip, appearing as if he were contemplating his own words, but then he smiled again as he turned back to Parker, enjoying the dilated cloud that glazed over the man’s eyes. “But don’t worry, I won’t be teaching Peter that one. I’ve always preferred the creativity in making my own rhymes... and y’know I’ve gotten pretty good at it too. I know all sorts of rhyming words now. Me an’ Pete read Dr. Seuss so much it’s almost like second nature at this point.”

He felt a warm puff of air dance across the side of his face and he turned to find Richard’s teary eyes staring back at him. His chin quivered pitifully, face red from the strain. Tony simply smiled a kind smile and yanked the man’s hand out of the restraints with one forceful tug, pinning the hand to his back at an uncomfortable angle before grasping his thumb between his own fingers.

“Anyways... this is usually done with the toes... but I feel it’ll be more effective to just settle with the fingers instead. I’m sure your feet reek,” he made a dramatic flicker of his hand in front of his nose, and he heard Rhodey chuckle from his spot in the room. “... and I really don’t wanna touch your disgusting toes.”

Richard scowled at him, but before he could get a word out, Tony was already moving on with a tight smile.

“This little piggy hurt his son,” Tony grinned as he twisted Richard’s thumb, eliciting a loud crack. Of course, Richard screamed. He thrashed against Tony before Tony squeezed the thumb he had just broken in retaliation and Richard immediately stopped, biting back a pained grunt as his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

“Oh please,” Tony scoffed, “it doesn’t hurt that bad you pussy. I broke my own thumb at least five times by the time I was twelve.”

“Unlike you Stark,” Richard spat out through heavy breaths, “I’m human and I have feelings.”

“Mm, I don’t know. I don’t think I’d have to be doing this right now if you had feelings.” Tony chuckled, grabbing onto the index finger before Richard had a chance to process. “This little piggy shoots a gun.” That snap was also followed by a loud scream, nearly muted by the dry strain in Richard’s throat.

“This little piggy killed his wife.” Tony’s uppity voice didn’t falter as the ring finger went next, pushed back until it snapped and nearly pressed against the back of his hand, hanging loosely against the knuckle.

“This little piggy will pay with its worthless little life.” Then there went the pinky.

“And guess what this one did?” Tony whispered into his ear with little-kiddy excitement, thumb and index finger grasping the remaining middle finger on the man’s hand tightly. Richard shivered against him, sweat pouring down his face as he quietly begged for him to stop. His voice quivered through the teary gasps, his entire body shaking through the adrenaline and pain. His pleas for mercy though only fueled Tony’s enjoyment, because he’s sure Peter at one point begged for the same.

He spoke the next words slowly, quiet and meaningful as his grip slowly tightened. Richard’s response was to cry... he cried and he begged, sobs wet and loud and trembling. (*“Please, please, please,”*)

“This little piggy went wee, *wee*, *WEE* all the way HOME.” He snarled along with the quick succession of three snaps that followed to the beat of the rhyme. He released him and reached up to grab a fistful of his hair and tugged so the man’s neck was angled backward uncomfortably so he could look into his eyes. Residue blood from earlier ordeals saturated his black shirt and dripped onto the floor. “So... would you like to apologize to your son now?”

Richard’s eyes were wide. Pupils blown and the white around the eyes bloodshot and cloudy as he stared up at Tony with a deep-seated mixture of hatred and fear. His jaw was clamped shut, a long string of loud hisses escaping through bared teeth as his chin quivered, lips spread apart to expose his reddened grin of unbearable agony. His lips flared out with each gasped breath, but other than that, he made no move to answer or surrender.

“I did nothing worth apologizing for,” Richard choked out for the millionth time, coughing on the speckles of blood pouring from his lip after biting down too hard and dribbling down his throat.

“Tell *him* that,” Tony growled angrily, tugging hard on his hair to pull at his head so his glare was directed at Peter, innocently sitting criss-cross atop Tony’s desk. “Look at your son and tell him all those things you did to him and his mother were okay, *and see what happens* .”

Happy took that as his cue to uncover Peter’s eyes. Immediately, his Bambi brown eyes blinked open and Happy reached back to pull off the headphones. Peter’s eyes fluttered in confusion as he slowly processed the two men a good few feet away from the desk. He stared at his father’s pale face curiously, then he looked back up at Tony’s frowning face.

“What you do?”

Tony’s frown broke away and he smiled to reassure him. “I just taught him the Little Piggies rhyme. That’s all.”

Peter’s eyes and smile brightened. “Wha’s that?”

“I’ll teach you when you’re older if you want. Now, why don’t you ask Richard your question again?”

“Don’t call me Richard in front of him,” the man coughed, “I’m his father,” he corrected through gritted teeth.

Tony tugged punitively at the hair still fisted in his hands. “Not anymore. Now listen to Peter’s question.”

Peter focused seriously, the darkness from earlier returning to his eyes as he glared ominously at his father as he repeated the question he’d asked a thousand times. “Did you kill my Mama?”

“No!” Richard spat angrily, face turning red from the strain, veins popping from his neck as he shouted. “I didn’t kill your f-ing mother!” Then, a sharp pain in his lower back had him howling, sending a surprised Peter stuttering back as he stared, horrified, as his father’s eyes nearly popped from his skull.

“Let’s try that again, shall we?” Tony whispered with a faux lining of comfort in his tone, hand tightening on the thin blade he’d discretely pushed into the muscle of Richard’s lower back, twisting only slightly until the man was going lax against him. He made sure Peter wasn’t able to see the blade or the warm blood pouring from the wound and coating his hand, but... the loud screech that resulted seemed to be enough to startle the little boy.

“Apologize for killing his mother,” Tony instructed calmly as if he were comforting a pained child, removing his other hand that had fisted into Richard’s hair to brush stray strands away from his sweaty forehead. “And this will all be over.”

“Hell no,” Richard gasped through the pain, swallowing the glops of blood that had begun to pool in his mouth, and Tony pursed his lips in disappointment.

“I see. Ears and Eyes Pete. Turns out I need to teach him Little Piggies all over again.”

“Wait-wait-wait!” Richard cried out desperately, panicking when Peter started to reach towards the headphones to do as instructed. “Okay. Wait-wait-wait. Maybe... maybe it might have been my fault that she died.”

Peter’s eyes narrowed angrily and he slapped his little hand on the tabletop. “You killt her! You did it! I saw!”

“Okay-okay,” Richard placated gently, eyes flickering between Tony and his son apprehensively. “I admit it,” he swallowed thickly, “I killed her, okay? I’m sorry, okay? But-but she did things Peter... I couldn’t let her get away with it--”

“You killt her!!” Peter screamed, standing from his perch on the desk so he was towering over his father’s kneeling form. His face went red as he bawled in outrage, loud and harsh. “You killt her! You killt ‘er!!! I hate you!”

“Peter no,” Richard begged with wide eyes, “listen Baby. You don’t remember her like you think you do. She wasn’t all that you thought she was--”

“She loved me!” Peter shrieked once more, making a move to dive off the desk. Happy quickly leapt forward to wrap a single arm around the boy’s waist, tugging him backward so his back was

pressed against his large chest. Tony twisted the blade slightly before making his next point.

“Good. Apologize again. Then apologize for hurting him and not treating him right... and then say goodbye. You won’t be seeing him again.”

“No-no-no-no Stark. You don’t understand,” Richard pleaded, hurriedly spinning his neck to stare at the man, but he was stopped with another harsh scream rippling through his throat as the knife was pressed deeper into the tissue of his back.

“Apologize,” Tony instructed through gritted teeth without an ounce of remorse. He felt the anger rising and the more Richard spoke, the more anger there was to pile onto the fire. Tony wanted him dead.

Richard could taste the blood in his mouth; the metallic taste. The iron, and the unsavory tang as it slowly coated his tongue and throat as the knife continued to dive deeper into the muscles of his back.

“I’m sorry Peter,” he gasped harshly, breaths coming in short bursts, eyes rolling to the back of his head. “I’m sorry for hurting you. That was wrong. I’m so-so-so sorry. Please, please forgive me Peter. I’m sorry.” Another harsh scream and Tony grimaced slightly as the man collapsed heavily against him. He yanked out the blade, discreetly handing it off to Rhodey behind him as he dropped the limp, whimpering body to the floor.

He looked up to see a teary Peter sobbing as he stared down at his father's body and the rhythmic lift of his chest.

Tony sighed, frowning in disappointment as he reached across his desk to grab the packet of wipes Happy already had out waiting for him. He quickly cleaned the blood from his hands and reached out to take Peter.

“Hey, Baby,” he cooed softly as he enveloped the boy in his arms, holding him close as the kid curled into him in search of the comfort he offered. “It’s okay. Do you feel better now?”

He felt Peter’s hand reach around his neck to grab onto the hair at the base of his skull, nodding against his shoulder, whimpering and sobbing with small hiccups as he rubbed his snotty face along Tony’s white shirt.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Tony whispered, leaning away so he could press a lingering kiss to

the side of his head. Peter leaned into it, wrapping both arms around the man's neck to pull their heads closer, body shaking with small tremors.

"Peter," A loud groan coughed out at Tony's feet and Tony immediately turned Peter's head away before he could see, pushing the kid's face into his shoulder. Then he kicked away the mangled hand reaching out for them, scowling. He repressed the urge to stomp his foot on the mutilated limb. Peter didn't need to hear the loud scream and subsequent cracks of multiple bones breaking apart within the man's hand.

He looked up at the ceiling and hoped JARVIS was back online.

"JARVIS get Bruce down here to patch up Parker. We need him happy and healthy when we need some more questions answered. Then have Allen bring up my tools."

"Of course, sir," JARVIS replied immediately.

Tony rocked slowly from side to side with Peter in his arms. Hushing and humming to try and soothe him, because it was him that made poor Peter sit through that traumatizing ordeal. He had a feeling that this particular event would follow Peter for the rest of his life, a darkness inside of him always lurking within the shadows; a trauma that can't be forgotten. Because things like this... they ruin people. He only hoped Peter was still young enough to forget. He hoped the memories were new and short enough to be repressed and overwritten by years of love and support. He hoped. Then, for some reason that made him think of his father... how Tony had sat in on many of the same events at Peter's age. Repeatedly. He'd learned from quite a young age how to properly break a man's finger to elicit the loudest screams... seven maybe? And he'd never forgotten. The memories followed him everywhere; they dominated his life as if he were a puppet and his younger years or learned behavior were the strings, guiding him through life on instinct and fear... not by choice. He lived the life of his father; the very one he had dreaded as a child. And here he was, doing the same to the boy he could almost admit he saw as a son... Almost.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm sorry." Tony cooed softly. Peter's grip tightened in response and before any more could be said, the door to his office was being thrown open again. It was Pepper.

"Pep? Where's Harley?" Tony asked.

"Upstairs," she answered stoically, casting a small glance at the groaning and moaning man splayed across the floor. She looked back up at Tony and Peter, arms outstretched towards the child cradled in her husband's arms. "Now give me my baby."

“Honey, I don’t think you should be carrying Peter right now. I’ll have Happy carry him-”

“Anthony Stark,” she bit out venomously, glaring at him, “give me. My. Baby. *Right now.* ”

“Okay-okay, fine,” Tony relented, reaching up to gently detach Peter’s grip from around his neck so he could deposit him in Pepper’s waiting arms. The kid didn’t seem to mind. He simply reached out towards Pepper, whimpering pitifully as a silent plea for hugs and comfort as Pepper fitted him perfectly against her hip.

“Oh, my sweet baby. It’s okay. Let’s go upstairs and you can watch some movies with Harley, hm?” Peter nodded eagerly against her, nuzzling into the side of her neck. So, she turned to look at Tony and nodded towards the man on the floor.

“How are you gonna handle him?”

“Bruce is comin’ in soon. He’ll fix up anything that may make him pass out, then spike him with some adrenaline to wake him up. There are a few more things I’d like to talk to him about.”

Pepper nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. I’ll drop Peter off with Harley and stay a little while to make sure they’re settled, then I’ll come down and join you.”

Tony grimaced at the thought and eyed his wife warily.

“You don’t like this kinda stuff Pep. And you hate the smell of blood right now. Or did you forget?”

“I can stomach it,” Pepper replied stonily, raising her eyebrows as if to dare him to tell her to stay upstairs. She made a pointed look at the pool of blood on the carpet in front of his desk. After the incidents today, she doubts he would refrain from keeping her in the loop.

“Alright,” Tony sighed with a small smile. He stepped closer and pressed a soft kiss to her lips then reached up a hand to smooth away Peter’s bangs before pressing a loving kiss to his forehead as well, pointedly ignoring the whimpered please from the man at their feet. “Love you. I’ll be up

soon to see you Peter, okay?"

Peter nodded and smiled warmly, waving goodbye before turning his face back into Pepper's collar.

"Give him hell Honey," Pepper smiled over her shoulder with a wink. Then she walked out the room with Peter in her arms, and Tony turned back to Richard, a menacing scowl finding its way onto his face.

"Now, that was just a warmup my friend. You're in for a real treat."

Pepper carried Peter all the way up to the penthouse, exactly where she had brought Harley an hour earlier.

Speaking of, the teen hadn't moved an inch since she had left him alone to go retrieve Peter. The TV was playing the mundane baking show Pepper instructed JARVIS to put on, and Harley was still curled beneath the fluffy blanket Pepper had tucked around him after pressing a goodbye kiss to his hairline.

"Hey, Honey," she greeted quietly, brushing her hand through his messy hair as she passed him during her trek around the couch. Peter was tucked into her shoulder, crying and snorting all over her blouse. She sat down, releasing a strained breath from the exertion of carrying Peter for an extended period. Peter remained latched onto her, but she still managed to scoot closer to Harley, reaching out to stroke his cheek to brush away the remnants of dried tears. "You doing okay?"

The boy nodded mutely without making eye contact, and Peter started stirring in her lap, crying out for her attention by tugging insistently at her shirt.

"Oh sweetheart," Pepper cooed, pulling her hand from Harley to repeat the same gesture on Peter. She strained to reach out and grab the box of tissues on the coffee table and set them beside her on the couch. It seemed as almost second nature to yank out two soft tissues and press them to Peter's nose while instructing him to "blow". When he seemed to run out of snot, Pepper wadded up the tissue and discarded it next to the box beside her. Then, she reached out to pull Peter flush against her once more, his tiny body molding around the baby bump, legs splayed across either side of her lap and head pillowed comfortably on her chest. She rocked, and hummed, rubbing his back, all

just to calm him down and *hope* he won't be scarred by whatever it was Tony had been careless enough to let him witness in that room. She wanted to slap the man silly... but at the same time, she understood.

"Did-did um..." Harley began tentatively, staring at Peter before dropping his voice into a soft whisper, "Did Tony kill him."

Pepper smiled reassuringly at him, holding out her arm in invitation for him to scoot closer. The boy just looked so broken... he'd been strong too long and he just needed a little love. So, it was a relief when Harley didn't hesitate to accept the comfort. Eagerly throwing himself at her with fresh tears bursting forth. He curled in close, tucking himself under her arm to cuddle into her side for comfort... just like he used to do with his mother.

The tears just didn't want to seem to stop once he had allowed them to escape earlier. The dam had broken from the surplus of emotion and now it was almost as if that dam were nonexistent... there was no need to be crying just because Pepper Stark offered him a hug. Heck, there had been no reason to cry after she left just because he didn't want to be alone. He was... he was nearly grown... he could handle himself. He shouldn't be crying like such a baby... Yet, he didn't move away, simply tucking closer and gulping down several breaths of air to savor the tender moment he's sure he won't be experiencing again any time soon. He closed his eyes and relaxed, practically purring in contentment when her fingers danced gently through his hair.

"No, Honey," Pepper whispered softly, removing her hand from his hair to wrap her arm around his shoulders and pull him closer. She kissed his head. "There are still a few important things he knows about that Tony doesn't. Tony's been really stressed lately... and do you remember those things you told me about? The things Tony, Rhodey, and Steve are always worrying about? Like Hydra and Ross?" Harley nodded. Pepper hummed, combing through his curls. "Well, Richard probably knows a lot of the answers to those things Tony's been wondering about. It'll probably be a little while before we see him again. He likes to work really hard, especially when it comes to protecting his family," she squeezed both boys closer to her and smiled. "He needs to make sure everyone's safe before he can relax again and it looks like Richard isn't going to be very cooperative... so let's take it easy on him for a while, alright?."

Peter sat up abruptly, pushing away from Pepper's hold, but remaining on her lap to stare at her firmly. "He say he gonna come up t'nigh' t' see me though, right?"

Pepper shushed him quickly when she saw the panicked tears begin to pool in his eyes. "Of course he will Sweetheart. He'll come up tonight to see you before you go to bed, okay? Maybe even for dinner too. We'll see." A small smile inches across her face. "And if you ask sweetly he might let you sleep in our bed tonight, hmm?"

Peter nodded solemnly, slowly slumping against her once more. He strokes her belly softly and sighs, whispering a quiet hello to Morgan.

Pepper stays a few more moments, cuddled up with her boys on their couch. She hums a couple of lullabies, busying both hands to comb through each of the boys' soft curls, finding it oddly similar to her own husband's head of unruly hair. Eventually, she finds herself smiling, noting all their small unique similarities to Tony, and picturing their life with two sons and their daughter on the way. It was a nice feeling... and these past few weeks have only solidified the belief that Tony would be an amazing father.

She allowed herself the innocent privilege of dreaming. Dreaming of a life where neither Peter or Harley had to go through the hardships they have faced. Dreaming of holding them as babies, cradling them in her arms and listening to their happy laughter. She dreamt of waking up on late nights to find an empty bed... but instead of knowing Tony had disappeared downstairs, she would creep down the hall to find them in her little boys' shared room. She pictured him curled up on Harley's bed with a baby Peter sleeping soundly on his chest as he coaxed Harley to sleep with a soft lullaby, cradling the older boy beneath one of his arms. She dreamt of both Harley and Peter growing up together with Morgan, constantly bickering and wrestling, harassing Tony, following him down to the office, ordering men around to fetch them chocolate milk just because they could... but they always said please. She pictured Rhodey and Happy struggling to help Tony keep their three children under control as they ran around the Tower getting into all kinds of mischief that only the children of Tony Stark could possibly find... and she could see them all grown up. Tony was proud of them and so was she... The picture warmed her heart... but when she opened her eyes, reality hit her, and she sighed.

"Okay babies," She whispered softly, readying to stand from the couch by gently pushing both boys out of their comfortable positions, which unintentionally sent Harley vaulting away from her in an awkward panic, retreating back under the blanket to hide the embarrassment painted across his pale, freckled cheeks. Pepper sighed, and instead of commenting on the matter, she silently made it her goal to ease Harley into the affectionate and caring lifestyle he'd missed out on for so long. It may be impossible to experience the dream she had pictured, but it wasn't too late to start making them into a real family.

Peter, though, whines, when Pepper begins shifting him out of her lap and Pepper, shushes him gently with a kiss and a smile. "I need to go help Da-Tony," she curses herself for nearly slipping up in such a horrendous manner. She could only imagine the chaos that a simple title would create... "Okay? You two keep each other company while I'm gone."

She nudges a distraught Peter towards Harley, and the boy simply tears up as he reverts his gaze between her and the older boy. "Harley will take good care of you while I'm gone, and both me and Tony will come up to see you soon..." she trails off when she notes the odd way Peter was eyeing Harley. "Would you rather I have Happy come up and sit with you?"

Peter quickly shakes his head and slowly curled into himself, wrapping his arms around his knees to try and mimic the warmth he had received when in Pepper's hold. At that, Pepper nearly found herself giving in and staying there with them, but then Harley was lifting his blanketed arm in a hesitant invitation as Pepper had done towards him earlier. Peter stared at him. Forehead puckered in saddened confusion, lip jutted out in a pitiful little pout.

Pepper watched as Harley's eyes lowered insecurely and he slowly began to lower his arm, but Peter leapt forward, diving beneath the fringe of the blanket and scurrying to cozy up into his side. The blanketed arm lowered and Harley stared down at Peter with wide eyes as the boy curled closer, pillowing his head on Harley's chest.

"Okay," Pepper smiled. "Be good." She stood from the couch with her arm wrapped securely around her abdomen. She took two steps and stopped to lean down and press a soft, loving kiss to Harley's forehead. The boy's eyes widened owlshly at her, and he blinked in surprise, but then Peter was popping up with a jealous frown and angry eyes focused in on Harley. He reached out for Pepper indignantly, eyes narrowed in a cute, yet angry manner.

"Okay fine," Pepper relented with a soft laugh. She reached over to give him another hug and press several kisses to his face. "I have to go now," she pressed one last kiss to his forehead and pushed him back towards Harley, "be good for Harley, Sweetheart. Tell JARVIS if you need anything."

Then she was gone, leaving the boys alone with the TV droning on as a fuzzy undertone of the tense silence between them.

Peter sat up from where he had comfortably settled himself against Harley and he stared seriously at the boy. "Does this mean we're allowed to be friends now? Since my Daddy ain't 'round anymo'e?"

"Yeah kid," Harley responded through a forced smile... and then the blaring silence returned, only interrupted by the worried shouts of the bakers on the TV. So, Harley took it upon himself-- being the oldest and the most mature-- to ease the tension. "Listen, Peter," he began hesitantly, "I'm really sorry."

"Fo' what?" Peter questioned innocently.

Harley hesitated. "For... for letting Ricard do all those things to you and not telling anyone."

“It’s ‘kay,” Peter insisted, “I fo’give you. Tony fixes it now.”

Harley smiled at that. “Yeah, he’ll fix it. He’s good at doing that, isn’t he?”

“Yep,” Peter grinned, far more lively than he should be after seeing his father in the aftermath of being tortured. “So dat means you don’ worry ‘bout your Daddy eider. Kay? Tony fix it too.”

Harley’s eyes widen and his mouth falls open in surprise before it clamps back together in an angry scowl.

“I don’t have a Dad anymore Peter,” he snapped darkly, avoiding the curious boy’s all-piercing eyes. He didn’t like how Peter seemed to know everything yet nothing at the same time. It was an irritating paradox.

“Oh,” Peter voiced, “he dead?”

“No. I just don’t have a Dad... I kinda wish he was dead though so I won’t ever gotta worry ‘bout seeing his stupid face again.”

Peter’s face puckered in confusion. “You jus’ say you didn’ have a Dad. How can you wish he died when he’s no’ real?”

Harley snickered and reached up to Peter’s hair. “You’re too smart for your own good, kid.”

“But I don’ unders’and!” He whined huffily, throwing his hands in the air to try and imitate an adult’s way of expressing exasperation.

Harley smiled in amusement. “Okay. Well... he’s my “father”, but not my “dad”. I disowned him a long time ago. He doesn’t deserve any title of endearment like that.”

“What d’ya mean? Dads and fathers are s’pposed to be the same.”

“Well, they are... but sometimes they aren’t. Dads don’t treat their kids the way my father treated me and my sister. We’re related by blood... and that’s it. He’s only my father in the most literal of terms.”

“What he do to ‘ou?” Peter questioned curiously, slumping forward against Harley like he was preparing for a bedtime story.

Harley wasn’t so sure he should share his childish traumas with Peter after the kid had to face down his own dad just a few minutes earlier. Heck, he didn’t want to share his feelings with the kid because who knew who he’d blab to. Next thing he knew, Tony would be busting into his room in the middle of the night, demanding to know everything of his father so he could hunt him down and slaughter him for all the terrible things he’d done... then again, Harley didn’t really see the harm in that happening. Either way... he didn’t think Peter needed to hear about those kinds of things. So, he settled with a safer option.

“Sorta like what your dad did to you.”

Peter didn’t say anything for a while as he slowly digested this new piece of information.

“So...” Peter began quietly, “my dad ‘s not my dad eider?”

Harley panicked. “No-no-no. That’s not what I said-”

“Excuse me! Yes, it is.” Peter argued... then his voice lowered into a soft whisper as he admitted something more. “Tony say he not my Dad anymore... you right...” but he didn’t seem very upset. He seemed more intrigued than anything else. “Hey, Harley?”

Harley looked at him nervously. Who knew what kind of can of worms he’d just opened.

“If our dads aren’t dads, what wou’d make them dads? What they suppose’ to do anyway?” Peter seemed genuinely confused by the whole concept, and Harley felt bad, because... the kid didn’t know any different from the twisted kind of love his father showed him. “I don’ like having a not real Daddy. I wanna real one.”

Harley panicked, and he stumbled over his words as he tried his best to explain things in a way the kid could understand.

“Well, Dads are supposed to be kinda like Moms. They love you a lot.” He didn’t know any other way to describe it. “And-and there are tons of kids who get new Moms and Dads all the time. So maybe you could get some too if you wait.”

“Ohhh,” Peter nodded.

Harley smiled and poked him playfully in the stomach. “So you might still have time to get a good dad.”

“Cool!” Peter grinned. “I wan’ a new one righ’ now! How do I ge’ one? Do I gotta ask JAR’IS for one?”

Harley grinned at the kid’s cheeriness. “You have to find one silly.”

“Okay,” Peter nodded seriously, “how do I know I found one then?”

Harley shrugged his shoulders. “You’ll know. They’re supposed to be real nice. They won’t hit you or scream at you when they’re mad. They might raise their voice sometime when you do something stupid, but they’ll always forgive you. They give lots of hugs and kisses,” Harley grinned, knowing that would excite the kid. “They teach you cool stuff and they just... they love you for you... and they’ll do everything and anything to make sure you never get hurt, and that you’re always happy... and they’ll burn down the entire world to keep you safe.”

He glanced down at Peter to see an awestruck twinkle flicker through his eyes. “Really?” He whispered in awe.

“Yeah,” Harley grinned.

“How do you know so much ‘bout dads?” He questioned softly.

Harley shrugged his shoulders again. “I’ve seen a lot of movies, I guess. Dads always seem to act the same. The real dads *never* hit their kids. *Ever*.”

Peter nodded, eyes cast down as he thought.

“Harley?” Peter questioned, looking up to narrow his eyes at the boy. “Are you messin’ with me? ‘Cause tha’s real mean if ‘ou are.”

“No!” Harley quickly spat out, “why would you think I’m messing with ya?”

“Well,” Peter sighed, face serious and eyebrow raised as if he were about to make a very important point. “If what you say is true then we gotta be brothers now cuz Tony’s our rea’ Daddy.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed that. And I hope it wasn't too much having Peter in the same room... but anyway. Thanks for reading, lemme know what you thought. I hope to continue updating on a regular basis.

So thanks for reading, can't wait to hear from you ;)

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

These things just keep getting longer and longer. My Gosh.

Anyway... this chapter is probably one of my favorites so far. It's mostly mindless fluff, but the beginning does have a bit more torture and violence and stuff. So be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pepper walked into the room, nose wrinkling in disgust after getting a nasty whiff of the bloody stench that had grown stagnant in her husband's office. Her earlier frown turned down into a disgusted grimace as she looked down at the browning pool of blood that had seeped into the expensive carpet she had picked out. She will definitely have to force Tony to hire someone to deep clean the rugs because the smell was more than godawful. Or maybe it was just her crotchety senses being dramatic again. Either way, it took everything in her power not to gag as soon as she stepped into the room.

“Ugh,” she groaned, waving her hand in front of her face despite knowing it would do nothing to fix the smell.

Tony’s head snapped up to look at her. He smiled, releasing a dazed Richard Parker who he had been holding up with a strong hand fisted in his hair. As soon as the support of Tony’s hand had left, the man’s head fell limply against the old metal table he had been set up at. Bruce sat in front of him, working away, glasses on, and eyebrows furrowed as he busied himself by mindlessly splinting each finger on the man’s right hand.

“Hey sweetheart,” Tony greeted, approaching her with an apologetic smile while he hurried to wipe the blood on his hands onto his black dress pants. “How’re the boys holding up?”

“They’re perfectly fine,” she answered with a forced smile. “They’re probably watching a movie right now...” she gave him a look. “And Peter is pretty dead-set on you coming to see him before bed like you promised... and you told Harley we’d watch a movie too. You better finish this up sometime this evening. It’s too early to start breaking your promises to them. They need stability from this point forward.” Her stern glare left no room for objections. “Especially Peter... he’s no doubt going to demand your undivided attention tonight.”

Tony chuckled, ignoring the underlying insinuation Pepper was making about their newfound relationships with the two boys and he reached out a hand to cup the side of her face, bringing her closer so he could press a soft kiss on her forehead. “I think I’ve just spoiled him with too many kisses. I shoulda known better than to give in to his demands so easy. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to say no to ‘im.”

Pepper grinned, pressing her forehead to rest against his. Tony wrapped his arms around her waist as an immediate response, hand grazing over her belly. “You’re a pushover, and I’m somewhat afraid that he’s going to eventually favor you over me because of it.”

“You say that as if I’m not already his favorite.” Tony grinned at her with that smug grin of his, pinching her ass playfully. Pepper scoffed and slapped at his cheek gently before looking over her shoulder towards Rhodey, who was preparing something at Tony’s desk. She took a step away from him and Tony released her from their embrace.

“What’re you planning for him? You aren’t going to use that terrible anti-paralytic again, are you? Gosh, they always get so loud. It gives me a headache.”

“Nope,” Tony smiled cheekily, nodding towards the needles on his desk that Rhodey was doing... something to. “Quite the opposite actually... I gotta wait for Bruce to concoct some more of that loveliness. Used most of his stash on an assassin last month. So, I decided to try out something new this time. I haven’t experimented with torture in quite a while.” He actually looked excited at the prospect and Pepper rolled her eyes at him. “Something I learned during my short time at the Ten Rings... hey, did you know that Hydra has control of the Ten Rings too?” He narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously and she nodded her head without an ounce of shame.

“Of course you do... we’re gonna have a serious talk after all this is over. There’s no way you know half the stuff you do just from the news.” He smiled and huffed when she smirked at him. “I can’t believe you... savin’ my ass without me even telling you that my ass needs savin’. You’re my knight in shining armor Potts,” he grinned, leaning in closer to whisper the last part in her ear. “I might show you how appreciative I am tonight.”

He clapped his hands loudly before Pepper could respond and he spun back around, turning to face Parker, Bruce, and Coulson, who had come back after he ensured his people were secure with Happy and Natasha’s supervision on the lower floors. Then Tony glanced over at Rhodey laying out the last of the needles on the silver tray. He began removing the pair of latex gloves he had been wearing.

“Almost finished Honey-bear?”

The man nodded, and carefully picked up the pallet of long needles, carrying them over towards the cold metal desk used for occurrences just like this. Of course, the torturing bit wasn’t typically done right in Tony’s office... but there was already blood everywhere so he didn’t think there was much harm in continuing.

Richard sat slumped forward in his chair. Both hands extended and waiting to be strapped down to the table.

“Great,” Tony nodded. “Honey, do you maybe wanna sit in my chair? You’ve been on your feet enough today already,” he guided Pepper behind his desk so she could sit down. He leaned down to whisper one more thing to her as he tucked a pillow behind her back. “I know you aren’t a big fan of all this stuff, so if you need to leave it won’t hurt my feelings one bit.” He pushed her hair behind her ear and pressed a quick kiss to the side of her head.

Pepper craned her neck back to smile at him. “I’ll be fine,” she settled a hand on her stomach and Tony kissed her cheek once more before moving away.

Rhodey started tucking old towels around the table and Richard’s chair as Bruce finished up with his ministrations with both of Richard’s hands.

“You spike him yet?” Tony questioned impatiently, peering over the man’s shoulder with one hand braced on the back of his chair and the other on flat against the table. Bruce nodded mutely with a small sigh.

“With an unethical amount of adrenaline?” Bruce snapped with exasperation, “Yes. I haven’t numbed his other hand yet though.”

“Great,” Tony smiled, ignoring Bruce’s jab... he had always been a goody-goody. “Lemme restrain him and you can get right on that. Don’t need him gettin’ any funny ideas once the drugs hit him.”

It didn’t take much longer after that before the lights of the office had been dimmed by JARVIS and Richard was at attention, jittering uncomfortably in his seat with wide eyes snapping every which way. His chest heaved up and down with panicked breaths, but other than that... he remained abnormally pleasant. Coulson stood a few feet away from the desk, quietly observing like the emotionless creep he was, and Rhodes had left some time ago to go help Happy and Romanoff with getting Coulson’s men settled in for their temporary stay at the Stark Tower.

“Well, Richard,” Tony began with the release of a heavy breath and a small smile, “you feeling any better?”

“Fine as can be after my son’s been brainwashed by a psychopath.” Richard forced out through gritted teeth, glaring darkly.... Aaand just like that the nuisance was back. Tony knew it wouldn’t last very long.

“Hmph,” Tony huffed indifferently. He picked up one of the slender pieces of metal Richard had been eyeing. The platter sat at the end of the table with 5 long, oddly shaped needles lined up neatly against the shimmering metal. “Y’know if you had really cared for him as much as you claimed, I feel that Peter would have made a different decision. It involved no brainwashing on my part.” He puts the needle back down, leaving it slightly askew, and folds his hands together. “But we aren’t talking about Peter anymore. I’m over that. There are a few other things I need to know about before I kill you. That’s all.”

Richard’s lips pursed together tightly.

“Give me the exact compounded formula you’re using to develop your radioactive serum.”

He can see Richard’s lips inch up in a half snarl, but his mouth remains clamped shut.

Tony narrowed his eyes. “What is the chemical you injected into Peter? What were you testing for? Is it related?”

More silence. Tony grit his teeth in annoyance. He always hated doing this part... it always made him angry because he didn’t have the patience to deal with uncooperative idiots. He preferred the whole “revenge” ploy where he didn’t have to refrain from killing someone just because he was lacking information. And knowing that Richard held the upper hand; knowing that he *knew* Tony wouldn’t kill him until he told him what he wanted to hear... that irked him and he wanted nothing more than to make the man suffer because of it.

“Okay. How about this? Tell me about the Ten Rings. Are you merging? Making a deal? In cahoots? Or was it all just an ill-fashioned rumor to get me kidnapped and out of the way?”

Still nothing. He slammed his palms down on the metal table, looming over the man wearing an angry scowl. “I wouldn’t have ventured my sorry ass across the globe without a reason and OsCorp knows that, so you gave me one. Word must have just happened to get out that the Ten Rings killed my mother and father at the same time Obadiah set out to have me killed. I’m not an idiot Parker. Tell me what I want to know and I’ll put you out of your misery.”

Richard narrowed his eyes in defiance.

“Last chance,” Tony spat, “Tell me what you know about Hydra. What’s their plan? What’s *Oscorp*’s plan?”

Richard’s eyes flickered towards Coulson for just a moment, and Tony’s eyes narrowed. “He’s Shield... or so he claims. Is he lying to me? Or are you just confused with all the crazy signals goin’ off in your head? Here, I’ll make it easy.” Tony clears his throat. “Tell me about Hydra.”

“Got to hell,” the man spat.

Tony rolled his eyes and groaned. “Great... you’re gonna make this difficult. I really didn’t want to have to get my hands dirty again. After I wash them so many times they get dry and gross. I hate it.” He grimaces in disdain and picks up the longest needle. The tip is thin and sharp, but beyond the end, the skinny needle broadens with several thin fronds flayed around the metal. He grabbed ahold of Richard’s uninjured hand. “My wife hates the smell of blood... so this means I’m gonna have to wash my hands *and* take a shower before I can go upstairs and tuck your son into bed.” Tony smiled. “I wonder what story he’s going to ask me to tell him tonight... I might teach him Little Piggies after all. I suppose it wouldn’t do that much harm until he’s old enough to understand. Although, he’s fairly bright for his age..” He rests the end of the needle right beneath the edge of Richard’s nail, pushing forward just before it splits the skin beneath the cuticle. Richard’s eyes were wide and his breathing labored as he watched Tony work with a practiced hand.

“Speaking of stories,” he pushed the needle in, and it slid through his flesh smoothly. Richard didn’t so much as flinch. Not even when Tony gave a harsh tug on the needle so the small fronds could expand within his finger, keeping the long sliver of metal in place. “I remember getting this done to me back when I was kidnapped... It was actually a friend of Coulson’s over there,” he nodded towards Coulson with a smile. “Grant Ward. Ugh, that man was... scary. Wow, real scary let’s be honest. I mean... he had *me* kinda creeped out. That’s gotta say something. But, yeah... really... I think it was the most creative form of torture I’ve ever experienced. Makes sense though... turns out he was Hydra all along... Hydra’s always been known for their unorthodox way of doing things.”

The needle had been pushed in until only two inches were left peeking out from beneath the nail with blood smeared along the tip of his already swollen finger. Richard stared down it with a confused haze of awe.

“Kinda weird isn’t it?” Tony laughed, gesturing down at the swollen, irritated skin surrounding the needle. “It’s always odd to not feel pain when you know you’re supposed to feel it. Sometimes your brain even starts making up pain to compensate.” He reached for the next sharp needle and slowly did the same to his next finger. He smiled, patting the man’s hand to convey a feigned curtain of comfort when he felt Richard’s hand jerk noticeably through the periodic tremors. Tony smoothed the pads of his fingers along the back of the man’s hand and tapped twice before forcefully driving in the needle and giving it a sharp tug.

“See, here’s what happens,” Tony adds in a conversational manner as he moves to pick up the next one from the platter. “Bruce numbed your hand for about half an hour, and...” Tony lifts the last needle to examine it. “The length of the needle is laced in an anesthetic. That way you can’t feel any of the pain... yet.”

He pushed in the last needle and looked up at Richard. “Crazy huh? Y’know I thought it was pretty smart what Ward came up with. I haven’t tried it out myself yet; haven’t really had the

opportunity. So I decided that now's a best time as any... soon the numbness will start to wear off and you'll start to feel *everything* you're not feeling all at once... unless you tell me what I want to hear." His eyes narrow in on Richard and he saw the man gulp heavily, eyes flickering, entire body twitching and sweating as he squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, but his mouth remained in a stoic frown.

"I'll reword it this time in case you didn't understand... tell me *everything* you know."

Richard responded by spitting in his face.

That, of course, made him angry. So he stabbed him... at least a couple times. He must have lost count.

When Peter heard the familiar ding of the elevator, he scrambled. His legs kicked wildly and his arms flailed as he fought against the invisible restraint of gravity pulling him further into Harley and the cushions. It was a mighty effort but he was eventually able to sit upright. His face split into an excited grin as he stood on wobbly feet. Two seconds later and Harley had a hand pushing against his face as Peter braced his palm against the boy so he could step all over him to cross his lap. His heels dug into the other boy's leg as he staggered his way across Harley's thighs, to perch himself on the arm of the couch. His smile only brightened when he spotted an exhausted Pepper and a stressed-out Tony stepping out of the elevator.

"Tony!" He cried out in excitement, arms reaching out towards the man as he came closer. Soon, Peter had lost all patience and vaulted himself off the couch when the man was within a close enough proximity to catch him.

Tony caught him of course, wearing a pinched smile and tired eyes. He held him at a distance, arms clasped underneath his armpits as he carried him like a dirty rag doll in front of him. "Hey Squirt." He took the last couple steps towards the couch and deposited the boy back onto the cushions beside Harley. "Listen... I'm kinda nasty, so I'm gonna go take a shower. Why don't you boys help Pepper with dinner so we can eat? Then you can both get ready for bed and we'll watch a movie like I promised. Sound good?" He adjusted his jacket lapels so it better covered the splatters of blood sprinkled all over his white shirt. Peter didn't need to see any more blood today.

Peter leaped for him again, arms wrapped tightly around Tony's upper arm and shoulder as he tried to scale him. "No-no-no. Don' go again."

Tony smiled and gently pushed the boy away. "I have to. Ms. Pepper doesn't like me when I'm all smelly. I'll be real quick. I'll be back soon." He sighed heavily and hooked his hands beneath Peter's underarms once more to lift him off the couch and lower him back onto the ground. "Now skedaddle and help PepPep."

"Fine," Peter huffed, stomping cutely towards the kitchen with a heavy pout and his arms crossed over his chest. Tony chuckled at the dramatics and turned around to begin his way down the hall towards his and Pepper's bedroom.

The boys both helped Pepper prep a simplistic dinner. Harley set the rarely used table for four, and Peter stood on a chair with a much-too-large apron tied around his waist to help stir the sauce for the spaghetti. So, by the time Tony was clean and smell-free, dinner was ready.

He leisurely made his way into the main room, decked out in a black wife-beater and grey sweatpants. His hair was still damp, but he reveled in the feeling of a good, warm shower. It was

always nice to wipe off the grime and blood from his body after an exhausting day's work. Even *he* felt a little drained after hours of torturing someone.

"Tony!" Peter cried out when he saw him, rushing towards the man with the apron still tied around his tiny body; the fabric barely brushed his toes when he stood. He crashed heavily into Tony's legs, nearly making the man stumble backward, but Tony was able to stay upright.

"Hey Buddy," Tony greeted with a tired half-smile. He patted the kid's head affectionately, but that was it... and Peter didn't seem so happy about the lack of attention. He growled in annoyance and lifted his arms insistently. So, Tony rolled his eyes and gave in to his demands. He hoisted the boy wearing an oversized apron-dress off the floor so the kid was propped against his hip. Peter hummed in contentment, wrapped his arms around his neck, and settled his cheek on the man's shoulder. Tony smiled, patted his back and walked into the dining room where Harley was helping carry the food to the table.

"Looks delicious you guys," Tony praised. Harley set the dish of pasta in the center of the table and hurried to take a seat at the place-setting farthest away from the head of the table, staring up at Tony with his head angled down and his eyebrows raised. Tony frowned at Harley's reaction to him. He had done so well dragging the boy out of his hard, stubborn shell, and he cursed himself thinking the kid had retreated back under it. Earlier he had hoped that Harley's breakdown was only a heat of the moment response... but he didn't seem to be over it yet (At least he *thought* that's what Harley's new demeanor was about). Tony hoped it wouldn't have a lasting effect on the comfortable relationship that had been slowly developing between them... but the scared, submissive posture the boy was displaying right now didn't give him much hope.

So Tony inwardly sighed to himself, smile softening and eyes downcast as he looked down at the kid. He raised his hand towards his head, nostrils flaring angrily when he saw Harley flinch away from him, but he settled the hand on the kid's head a bit awkwardly anyway. The kid knew better than to think he was going to hit him, but knowing that didn't make it hurt any less. "Thanks Kiddo. You're a big help. I appreciate it." Then, after a small, awkward hair ruffle, Harley's mouth lifted in a small smile before he was snapping his head to stare down at his plate. It was hard to tell if it were embarrassment or nerves... he hoped it was just embarrassment.

"M I big help too?" Peter questioned, lifting his head to poke at Tony's cheek with his index finger. "I stirr the sauce."

Tony turned his head to look at the boy and smiled. He leaned his head forward to press his nose to Peter's and give him a quick Eskimo kiss. "Yes, a very big help. I'm so proud." He lowered the kid down onto a chair to the right of his own at the end of the table and entered the kitchen to help Pepper with the last of the food. He carried in the heavy saucepan, and Pepper brought out a plate of warm garlic bread with a wide smile on her face.

"Let's eat up!" She grinned, taking the seat next to Harley, across from Peter, as Tony sat in his seat at the head of the table. Harley was a bit tentative to reach for the food at first, but then Pepper was piling pasta onto his plate and he eagerly began lathering the noodles with the red sauce Peter had helped prepare. Peter, of course, immediately grabbed two pieces of bread, one for each hand, and chomped down without hesitation. Pepper gestured with a nod of her head for Tony to serve Peter as she spoke to the boy sweetly.

"How about you eat a little bit of spaghetti before you fill up on bread, okay Honey?"

Peter shook his head defiantly ("*don't want psghetti*"), but Tony ignored it and placed a small helping of noodles and sauce on his plate anyway. "Listen to Pepper, Peter." He instructed a bit

snappishly without meaning to, reaching to pull the second piece of garlic bread from Peter's tiny hand.

After that, Peter silently ate his food, as did everyone else. Nobody spoke thanks to the large elephant lingering in the room, and, well... it was odd. It was the first time they had ever eaten all together, sitting around a dining table like a-- gosh should he say it-- *family*. Tony didn't quite know what he was supposed to do or say, and neither did the other two sitting around the table. Peter, however, remaining blissfully oblivious to the tension. He was too busy struggling with the long, slippery noodles. Eventually Tony had enough with watching Peter struggle, dropping several pieces of pasta on his lap after smearing sauce all over his face while trying to guide long, swinging strips of noodles into his open mouth with his head tipped back. So, Tony reached over and cut up the noodles into tiny pieces with his knife.

Peter, being the polite child he was, thanked him enthusiastically and shoveled the forkful Tony had prepared for him into his mouth. After that, the room fell back into the deafening silence... until Peter had finished eating and immediately launched into a one-sided conversation about the cool robot movie he and Harley had watched together that afternoon.

It was as if the entire room had taken a big breath of fresh air because everyone just seemed to relax as they nodded along to Peter's exciting rendition of the cartoon movie. Before they knew it, everyone had finished eating and Harley had quickly offered to gather everyone's plates and scampered off towards the kitchen.

"And then-and then the big bow'ing ball robo' set up *donimoes* !"

"Wow, that's so cool Peter." Pepper nodded, cutting the boy off before he could go any further. She smiled and eyed the large mess the boy had created with his food. "I think you made a pretty big mess of yourself, so why don't we get you cleaned up, huh?"

Peter frowned and looked down at his shirt, which, by the way, was completely lathered in red sauce and stray noodles, along with his face and somehow his hair.

"Tony, why don't you give him a bath while me and Harley clean up from dinner." Pepper suggested, pushing her chair away from the table. Tony stared at her, dumbfounded.

"A-a bath? You want me to give him a *bath* ? Why-why me? I don't know how to do baths Pepper."

"Yes Tony," Pepper smiled, casting him a knowing look as she slowly stood from her chair. "A bath. It's not that hard. I can't bend down long enough to wash his hair, and it *needs* to be washed tonight. Now get going before he gets sauce all over my furniture."

Peter looked over at Tony with big wide eyes and Tony grimaced... he'd never given a kid a bath before.

So, five minutes later, there he had found himself, helping a messy child step out of his pants and underwear. The bath was ready, so he stood, expecting Peter to go get into the water while he discarded the stained clothes into the laundry hamper. Instead, the kid made a beeline for the large cabinet next to the toilet. The kid grunted in his effort to pull the heavy door open. Then, before Tony could stop him, he pulled out a good-sized plastic bucket and dumped all its contents into the bathtub. Next thing he knew, fifteen minutes later he was kneeling next to the large bathtub with a clean, happy kid sitting inside it... and approximately a million and one rubber ducks surrounding him.

“So...” Tony trailed off, reaching into the bubbly (*“a bubble bath Tony! A bubble bath!”*) water to grab one of the yellow ducks partially hidden in the large mass of white bubbles. “When did you get these, hmm?”

Peter looked over at him from where he was playing around and splashing with two of the ducks. His bubble eyebrows rose, and he lifted a hand to touch his bubble beard as if to make sure it was still there. “PepPep got ‘em fo’ me so I can play when ‘appy comes up to give me a bath.”

“I see,” Tony nodded with an amused roll of his eyes. “Just like she got you all those other toys littering my Living Room?”

“Yep,” Peter grinned, turning back to play with the ducks by splashing them against the water.

Tony adjusted so he wasn’t kneeling against the hard tile. He sat down and braced his side against the tub. Peter had already been fully bathed and ready, but apparently ‘playtime’ was a very, very important part of the bathtime ritual that Tony hadn’t been informed about.

“Look Tony,” Peter announced, scooting closer to the edge of the tub with a bearded duck raised up in his hand. “I named him Dony Duck,” he lifted up another duck with a red baseball cap and a red t-shirt, “and this one is Deter Duck.” He slapped the two ducks together and laughed when they bounced against each other. Then he started splashing through the water, scouring through the large mass of ducks and bubbles before picking out another two and lifting them for Tony to see as well. He lifted the first one, a female duck with earrings on either side of its head. “This one is Depper Duck, she likes fancy stuff, see,” he tapped on the earrings then he dropped that one into the water and lifted the last one, which wore a pair of black sunglasses, “and this one is Darley Duck. He’s really cool.”

Tony chuckled and bit his lip in amusement as he nodded along with the introductions.

“I named ‘em just now.”

“Oh did you now?” Tony mused, “are they by any chance related to Donald Duck?”

Peter scoffed at him as if he were the stupidest person on the planet. “Donal’ Duck ain’ real Tony.”

“Sorry. My bad,” Tony nodded, suppressing a smile as the boy rolled his eyes in exasperation before turning back to his ducks. Tony reached into the water and pulled out another duck. This one had a hat and glasses and his duckbill was downturned in a mean frown. Tony found it hilarious and held it up for Peter to look at. He had a feeling at who this might be.

“Who’s this one Pete?”

Peter frowned in contemplation as he looked at the duck. Then he reached out and took it from Tony’s hand to study it further. “He’s um... he’s Dappy. No!” He looks down at the other four he’d just named. “He’s Gappy Goose.”

“Goose?” Tony laughed. “That’s not a goose.”

Peter glared at him. “Well he can’t be Duck.”

“What? Why not?”

“He’s not... he’s not,” Peter frowned trying to explain his reasoning. “He’s not a Duck. He-he just a cousin or somethin’... He got ‘dopted by geese though. Harley says that happens sometimes to

kids with no moms and dads. So Gappy got 'dopted by geese. That's why he a goose even dough he look like a duck.

Tony humms, a soft smile spreading across his face, but he doesn't look at Peter. Instead, he looks down at Deter Duck and picks him up out of the water.

"Hmm. Well is Deter by any chance adopted too?"

"Yeah," Peter nods solemnly, watching his hand as he swats at bubbles in the water, seemingly unaware of the huge implication behind his answer. "So was Darley."

Tony nodded slowly and placed the rubber duck back into the water. He all of a sudden felt very lightheaded. Not in a bad way. More out of the surprise and exhaustion mingling together to make a nasty stew in his head kind of way. So, he let Peter continue playing while he got himself together because Peter probably didn't understand half of what he was saying.

After another five minutes, Tony was ready for bathtime to be over. It wasn't like he didn't enjoy Peter's company or anything, but he didn't know how much longer he could sit on the tiled floor without suffering major consequences to his hips and back.

"Hey, wanna make a deal?"

Peter looked over at him suspiciously. "Wha' kinda deal?"

"I'll teach you the Rubber Ducky song if you agree to get out so we can get you dressed and get on with that movie."

Peter's face scrunched up as he contemplated the offer.

"Okay. What's the rubber ducky song?" Peter agreed

Tony cleared his throat dramatically, looking around the tub for a plain old rubber duck. He picked it up from the water, rubbing away the suds and squeezed it. Sure enough, it squeaked.

He lowered his voice into an obnoxious drawl and started singing.

"Rubber Duckie you're the one," he sang dramatically. Peter giggled and splashed the water, smiling giddily up at Tony.

"You make bathtime so much fun." Tony found himself smiling as he squeezed the duck to make it squeak.

"Rubber Duckie I'm awfully fond of you! (Woh woh be doh!)" Peter laughed maniacally at his funny voice as Tony continued singing and squeaking the duck.

"Your turn," Tony instructed through his own laughter, handing over the toy. Peter eagerly grabbed for it and squeezed it to make it squeak.

His high-pitched voice rang out in the bathroom as he bounced along to the beat of the short song.

"Rubber Duckie you' da one!"

"Ou make bat'time toh much fun!"

“Rubber Duckie I’m lotsa fond o’ ‘ouuuuuuuuu!” He finished off with a series of uncontrollable giggles, nearly falling backwards into the sudsy water. Tony caught him before he could go under, and he reached for the towel sitting on the counter. “I gotta teach ‘appy dat one!”

“Yep, it’s hilarious. Now, let’s get out quick.”

Peter’s giggles dialed down and he pushed away Tony’s hands as the man tried to lift him out of the tub.

“Wai’-wai’-wai’ I gotta take out da toys for PepPep cuz she can’t reach in da tub an’ dey gotta get dry.” He giggled as he gathered an armful of ducks. He leaned over the side of the tub and released them, sending little yellow ducks bouncing and squeaking all across the tile floor at Tony’s feet, surprising the man into complete silence as he simply watches it happen in bewilderment. Then, Peter went back for more, gathering another armful of ducks and sending them falling over the side of the tub, several landing on Tony’s bare feet. Soon, the whole bath was cleared of ducks... and they were all over the floor.

Tony simply gazed around the bathroom with a contemplative frown before turning back to the soap-covered kid already standing in the water. Peter held out his hands expectantly towards him.

“Alrighty then,” Tony says, then his eyes fixate on the bubble beard and eyebrows Peter was still sporting. “Close your eyes quick,” he instructs, reaching down to scoop water into his free hand. Peter does as he’s told and his entire face puckers cutely as he squeezes his eyes shut. Tony chuckles and uses the water to wipe away the bubbles and Peter giggles against his hand. Tony adjusts the towel in his other hand quickly so he can dry Peter’s face before wrapping it around the kid and lifting him out of the tub.

“Y’know,” Peter began as Tony carried him out of the bathroom, towards the kitchen, because he was basically clueless as to what he was supposed to do now and Pepper can tell him what to do next. At least he knew better than to dress the kid back in his dirty clothes. “Happy usu’ly gives me my baths... you’re lots more fun.”

Tony laughed at that. “Well, I hope I’d be more fun than grumpy ol’ Happy.”

“You are,” Peter assured him seriously, patting him on the shoulder.

“Thank you,” Tony smiled. He soon found himself entering the kitchen to find Pepper and no Harley.

“Hey, Pep,” he greeted, “where’d Harley go?”

Pepper smiled at him and the towel-covered Peter propped against his hip. “I told him to go ahead and hop in our shower. Now, what’s this?” She cooed, moving forward to greet Peter with a tickle beneath his chin. “You’re all clean now. I barely recognized you without red all over you.” Peter giggled madly and wiggled in Tony’s arms before pressing his face into the man’s neck to escape Pepper’s onslaught of tickles to his own neck.

“I know,” Tony joked. “There was so much sauce I didn’t think I’d ever be able to get it all out.”

Pepper smiled at him and pressed a sweet, lingering kiss to his cheek. “You did a wonderful job Hon,” she smiled sweetly, hand subtly sliding down his lower back to rest right above the curve of his ass suggestively. He grinned deviously at her in response.

“Hey!” Peter scolded, lifting his head to glare at the side of Tony’s face before turning to glare at Pepper in annoyance.

“What?” Pepper asked innocently, removing her hand from Tony’s rear.

Peter didn’t answer, he simply glowered, lips puckering and eyebrows furrowing into an extreme pout. Then it hit her, and she grinned.

“What?” She teased, “are you jealous?” Then she leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to his cheek as well. That seemed to appease him enough. He smiled sweetly at her and dropped his head back to Tony’s shoulder in such a way that he could still see her.

Tony laughed outright and shook his head in amusement. Then, he turned to address Pepper.

“What do I dress him in? His old clothes are covered in spaghetti.”

“Oh!” Pepper jolts, “C’mon, I’ll go get some.”

Tony follows her down the hall, into their room. He vaguely registers hearing the shower running in their master bathroom as he watches Pepper approach their large dresser across the room. She pulls open one of her drawers, which had apparently been replaced and filled with an abundance of child clothing. She sifts through a folded stack of clothes, chatting about moving the clothing into the guest room that had unofficially been appointed as Peter’s once they moved his toddler bed into it after the third night of Tony finding a small toddler sprawled across his side of the bed. Tony just stands there, watching in both amazement and bemusement... he didn’t know how he hadn’t noticed a child’s wardrobe being moved into his dresser. Although, it really shouldn’t be a surprise. There were rubber ducks in the spare bathroom, Legos on his coffee table, and Dr. Seuss books lined up beside the various physics books in his office.

Then he was being instructed to set Peter on their bed. So, he did, and he stepped out of the way to let Pepper take over in helping Peter step into his pajamas... *he* had done the bath after all.

While she did that, Tony heard the water for the shower turn off and he was, again, hit with the domesticity of that moment. One child was being dressed by his pregnant wife, and the other had finished his shower in their room because the spare bath had been occupied by him and a toddler surrounded by bright yellow rubber ducks... and soon they were going to watch a movie together-- probably some animated Disney movie-- and Peter would no doubt insist on being tucked into his bed either with a bedtime story or no bedtime story depending on if the boy was too tired to think about asking for one.

It all hit Tony like a ton of bricks, and he found himself panicking, right there in the middle of his bedroom.

It just didn’t feel right... he had spent nearly the entire afternoon torturing a man, and now he just comes back upstairs to this lavish, familial lifestyle which just so happened to include his victim’s son? They had eaten dinner together, he had bathed a kid! Pepper was dressing a kid! A kid who had unknowingly insinuated that he and his wife had adopted him and this other random kid! He was taking care of two KIDS! He was about to go watch a childish movie with two. Random. Kids. He and Pepper weren’t parents yet... these weren’t their kids. He wasn’t supposed to be this lucky. Bad people shouldn’t be gifted a life like this. Things only ever turned out worse when they do.

This needed to stop before it got out of control.

“Tony?”

His head snapped up and he immediately stopped the pacing he had picked up during his mindless panic when he heard the excited voice of the little boy he had at some point become attached to. He didn't even know when that had happened. It just... it just *happened* .

“Tony.” He spoke again, looking at him expectantly, standing at the foot of his and Pepper's bed with his arms raised out towards him. Pepper smiled at him and stepped out of the way. Then despite Tony's conscious insistence that this was *not a good idea* , he still found himself gravitating towards the kid out of pure mechanical instinct... it still felt wrong.

He was picking Peter up and accepting the tight hug the boy offered when the door to the master bathroom opened. All three turned their heads to look at the bewildered teen that had stepped out, with steam pouring from the room in waves around him.

“Oh,” Harley said, reeling back a bit in surprise at everyone gathered in the room. “Didn't know y'all were out here.”

Tony forgot about his earlier dilemma entirely as his mind focused in on the teen. He slowly eyed the kid up and down with Peter now propped comfortably on his hip.

“Why are you still dressed in the clothes you wore all day?”

Harley's head snapped down to look down at the old shirt now clinging to his damp skin. “Oh-uh... I don't really... I don't have any clean clothes up here.”

Tony eyed him.

“You should have asked JARVIS to have Happy send you up a pair of your pajamas.”

“I don't have any pajamas, Mr. Billionaire,” Harley argued with a hint of snark in his tone. “I always sleep in my dirty clothes. I usually shower in the mornings.” Tony, of course, didn't show it, but he was happy to know that he hadn't lost the snarky boy completely. He saw the way Pepper shot the kid a pointed look, and the teen immediately sighed and stood down from his defensive stance. Tony simply ignored it and instead, rolled his eyes and moved towards the large dresser Pepper had been digging through moments earlier.

“You should've asked JARVIS or Happy to order you some.” He sorted through one of his drawers with one arm, eventually pulling out an old, faded band t-shirt and a pair of black sweatpants.

“These will be kinda big on you're skinny as hell body, but they should do the trick for tonight. We can't have a pajama party if you aren't wearing your pajamas.”

He offered the kid a small smile as he held the clothes out to him, and he was pleased to see the small smile that grew across the kid's face as he accepted them.

“Great. Go get dressed and meet us in the Living Room, kay?”

Harley quickly nodded and retreated back into the bathroom, and Tony hauled a chattering Peter to the Living room with Pepper following closely behind.

"I'm definitely going to send someone out to fetch him some new clothes." He announced to Pepper during their trek down the hall. She hummed in agreement.

"Yes, he does need new clothes. I've seen him wear that same shirt about four times... but I think

he'd enjoy it if he were able to pick out his clothes himself instead of you having someone else do it."

Tony shrugged his shoulders and nodded. "I suppose. I'll just let him pick out some things online and have it delivered." He heard Pepper sigh in exasperated amusement and he craned his head to the side to look at her. "What's wrong about that?"

"Nothing," she laughed, "I guess I was just trying to hint at you letting him leave this Tower. It's not good for a teenage boy to be locked away in a huge skyscraper filled with criminals. I think he'd enjoy going out and doing menial, boring things like a normal person. It would be good for him; get him reacquainted with society."

Tony frowned and their pace slowed as they entered the living area. He glanced down at Peter who was entertaining himself with a string poking out from Tony's collar. "I don't think I'm comfortable sending him out with any of the guys-"

"Why don't you take him then?" Pepper questioned with a challenging lift of her brow. Her arms crossed over her chest and Tony gaped.

"What?! No." He felt Peter shift to look up at him as well. "I'm not taking a kid out in public to go shopping. Do you have any idea how many people are trying to kill me? That's just asking for trouble."

"Why?" Peter questioned earnestly before Pepper could jump in.

Tony looked at him. "'Cause it just is."

"I think he'd enjoy it is all I'm saying..." Pepper trailed off and shrugged her shoulders. Then she veered off into the kitchen with a graceful spin on her heel. "I'm going to pop some popcorn."

Tony grumbled to himself and headed for the couch with Peter in tow. The idea had now been planted in his head. Sometimes he hated himself for marrying a grifter. She could manipulate him into doing just about anything without him realizing it until it was too late... He couldn't even begin to count the number of times Pepper had nonchalantly planted a small idea into his head, only for it to cultivate and evolve into an action that she had wanted him to perform. She was damn good at her job that was for sure.

But he wasn't about to be so easily tricked this time around.

He dropped Peter haphazardly onto the cushions first, which elicited a small giggle from the boy as he scrambled to sit upright. Tony fought against a smile and plopped down next to him. He should have expected it too, but the next thing he knew Peter was climbing onto his lap. Legs thrown over either side of his thighs, eyes alight with mischief as he tugged on the fabric of his tank top.

Peter bounced delightedly, reaching up to pet Tony's beard with a gentle hand. "What we gonna watch?"

"What *are* we gonna watch." Tony corrected without thinking. He reached out a hand and braced it on the child's waist to still his bouncing, and Peter stared at him.

"What are we gonna watch." Peter amended, hand dropping from Tony's face to grab the hem of his shirt once more. He tugged and laughed, then he tugged and laughed again. Then he hooked two tiny fingers into his sleeve and snapped the fabric against his shoulder. He laughed again. He

moved to the collar and Tony could tell this was the start to an endless cycle so he grabbed his wrists and told him to stop with a poke to the side. Peter only laughed harder and buckled at the waist to protect his sensitive stomach against the onslaught.

“We’re going to wait for Harley to make a decision.”

“Okay,” Peter relented, shrugging his shoulders and slumping forwards like a limp rag doll as if all life had suddenly been sucked out of him. The change in energy was drastic and dramatic, and Tony already felt exhausted.

Tony released a surprised ‘oomph’ when Peter’s bodyweight collapsed against his front, and he lifted his hand to pat Peter’s back without a second thought. Then, Harley walked in, both hands clutching the fabric on his hips as he rushed into the room.

“Um-um Boss?” He began with a bit of hesitation as he approached.

“What’s wrong?” Tony asked, sitting up slightly.

“Um-um, well... the pants are kinda big. They keep fallin’ off and there’s no drawstring to make it tight.”

Tony chuckled under his breath and made a gesture for him to come closer. “C’mere I’ll fix it.” He leaned forward, Peter’s body following his movement without protest as if the kid were glued to him.

Harley inched closer and as soon as he was within reach Tony grabbed onto one of the bunches of fabric he was clutching.

“I’m just gonna roll up the waistband,” Tony narrated as he reached his other hand around to lift Harley’s shirt enough so he could grasp the fabric of the sweatpants. He rolled the fabric until the sweats settled snugly around Harley’s hips. Tony finished by clapping him once on the side then leaned back into the couch. “We need to start feeding you more; fatten you up. You’re as skinny as a twig.”

Harley chuckled softly under his breath and climbed onto the couch, backing into the corner he had been settled in nearly all afternoon.

“What movie are you feelin’ tonight, Sprout?”

“Ugh,” Harley groaned, throwing his head back in annoyance. He didn’t know how Tony found out about the nickname. “I don’t know.”

“I know! I know!” Peter announced excitedly, sitting up from his slouch to look at Tony’s face. Tony glances down at him and the boy doesn’t hesitate to voice his opinion. “Robin Hood!”

“Oh that’s a wonderful movie,” Pepper announces, coming into the room with a large popcorn bowl. “Peter and I watched that together last week, didn’t we Peter?”

“Yeah! PepPep said he’s like you!” Peter nodded excitedly, reaching out to grab some popcorn as Pepper sat down next to Tony. Tony shot Pepper a look and she winked back at him while she tossed a piece of popcorn into her mouth. Then she pressed a piece against his lips and after a couple of moments, he opened his mouth to accept her offering.

"You're a menace," he whispered, leaning over to kiss her softly on the lips. Then he pulled away and grabbed a handful of popcorn.

"How's that sound kid?" Tony asked, turning to look at Harley huddled under his blanket.

"Sounds good," he answered blankly, avoiding Tony's eyes and instead focusing on the blank screen of the TV.

So, Tony yawns quietly and reaches over to grab the remote so he could cue up the movie. He casts a glance towards Harley, who's huddled up into the corner of the couch looking put off and worried as he stared at the television screen.

Pepper settles in close to his side, which averts his attention away from the kid. She leans against his arm and reaches up to brush a hand through Peter's soft hair. Peter hums contentedly, smiling a lazy smile as he shifts in Tony's lap so he could face the TV. Tony smiles without will, wrapping his arm securely around the child's waist and hugging him close to his chest.

The famous sound of the Disney castle lighting up interrupts the tender moment and Peter excitedly wiggles in anticipation. Pepper's hand falls from Peter's hair and her arm wraps around the boy's waist as well, overlaying Tony's arm so she could intertwine their fingers and rest her head on his shoulder. The three of them remain like that for the entire movie even though it didn't take long for Peter to fall asleep.

The movie ends and Tony cradles him like a baby and stands from the couch. At some point, he starts rocking the kid in his left arm while he reaches his right out to help Pepper off the couch as well.

"I'm going to head to bed," she yawns. Then, she leans forward and kisses Peter's forehead softly. Tony rests his hand on her back and smiles as she shifts away to lean down and kiss Harley's head as well. The teen's eyes widen like a surprised puppy and Pepper brushes the back of her hand along his cheek. "I'll see you in the morning Honey. Get some sleep for me, okay?" She finishes by clearing away the hair that had fallen into his eyes.

Harley nodded mutely and watched as Pepper waddled her way down the hall, towards the master bedroom. Then there was a strong hand wrapping around his upper arm and hefting him off the couch. It was Tony. Of course it was Tony.

"C'mon Sprout. It's bedtime."

Harley scowled and pulled away from him with a jerk of his shoulder. "I'm not a baby. I don't have a bedtime."

Tony's face falls into a frown and his eyebrows lower in a challenging way as he focused on Harley. "When you're sleeping under my roof you do. Now let's go."

Harley rolled his eyes and groaned. "Whatever." He muttered, spinning on his heel to march towards the guest room Peter's toddler bed had been recently moved into. He didn't get very far though, because soon the same strong hand was wrapped firmly around his bicep and spinning him back around.

"In case you didn't know this kid, I don't put up with that kind of disrespect. So, you wanna maybe try that again?"

Harley's scowl drops into an odd frown fidgeting between worry and distaste. "M sorry," he whispered quietly, head bowing to stare at his feet. The boy quietly cursed himself, knowing he definitely went too far. The man showed him so much kindness... and he wished that he'd just *stop* because now he craves it and he doesn't think he'd be able to pick himself back up again if all this love and kindness is torn away from him after he's let himself grow so used to it. He knows he doesn't deserve the kindness... and the more he receives from both Pepper and Tony, the more he's starting to realize that Peter had a valid point in what he said earlier.

Tony chucks him gently under the chin and Harley's head snaps up quickly in an effort to do anything he can to please the man. He may say he wants the kindness to *stop*, but he doesn't. He really, really doesn't.

Tony's eyes close as he sighs softly and his hand lifts to cup the side of Harley's head. "I'm sorry too kid. I know today's been kinda tough on you... I sometimes forget that your still a kid and I need to be a little less... harsh with you-"

"No you don't sir," Harley quickly interrupted, "I can take it. I've told you this. I'm old enough... I mean- you're-you're already my Boss so you should boss me 'round like everyone else, right?"

Tony chuckles under his breath. Because yes... he remembers the many occasions Harley has attempted to prove his worth to him. Albeit, his opinion on what the kid should or should not do has never actually changed, but Harley didn't need to know that. "Sure Kid. Now let's get to bed, hm? It's getting kinda late."

Tony guides him down the hall with a hand between his shoulder blades, even following him into the room.

Harley finds himself stumbling over what to say. Did the man think he needed to be tucked in like a *child*?

"I-I'm fine sir. I don't need to be tucked in. I'm not a baby."

Tony hummed noncommittally and smiles to himself. "Who said I was here to tuck you in? I need to put this leech somewhere y'know." He gestures down towards Peter still cuddled in his arms and Harley stares at him, tongue growing bigger in his mouth in embarrassment. Why would he ever think Tony Stark might want to put him to bed. It's ridiculous to even think because he's 14 years old and their relationship is nowhere near the closeness between the man and Peter. So yeah, stupid... but totally a relief, right? Because he didn't need to be tucked in. He wasn't a child.

"Well-um. I thought he was sleeping with you and Pepper tonight. He'd said he wanted to." He spoke in a tentative whisper as he slowly made his way towards the double bed that had been pushed to the side to make room for Peter's bed.

Pepper had said she was going to try and have Tony clear out the study, next door to the nursery, so they could put the spare bed in there. She hinted at that becoming *his* room, but he didn't really take it to heart. He knew Tony probably didn't want two-- almost three-- kids always hanging around his home. Tonight was just gonna be a rare exception.

"Well, what he doesn't know won't hurt him," Tony responded, bending down to lower Peter onto the mattress.

Harley sits up on the bed across the room, legs crisscrossed as he watches Tony and Peter closely. He watches as Tony carefully tucks the comforter around Peter's tiny shoulders, and he continues

to watch as Tony smooths the wild curls away from Peter's face. He finds himself wishing that he was a four-year-old too for a quick moment, but then quickly shuts it down with a barrage of self-deprecating insults and scoldings.

Then Peter wakes up.

His little nose twitches first, and his eyes slowly blink open and focus in on Tony.

"Tony?" He questioned, reaching his arm up towards the man as he uses his other to rub his eyes.

"Yep, it's me. Time for you to go to bed." Tony fixes the comforter around him again and grabs hold of the tiny fingers outstretched towards him. Peter yawns big and cute.

"Wanna s'leep with 'ou 'n PepPep."

Tony tried his best to reason with him. "We just lugged this bed up here for you Bubba. Let's try it out for one night and see how it goes, yeah?"

Peter grunts in annoyance and shuffles to fold his hands over his stomach above the comforter.

"Fine." He looks up at Tony intently. "'ou killt 'im yet?"

Tony inhales sharply and clears his throat. He reaches out to brush away Peter's curls to distract himself. He hopes Peter won't have any nightmares about it tonight.

"Not yet buddy."

"Ok," Peter nods solemnly, turning his head away from Tony. "That mean 'ou can't be my new Daddy yet?"

Tony actually chokes at that one. "What?!"

Harley sits up ramrod straight in his bed, eyes wide as he stares over at Peter, shaking his head wildly because this couldn't possibly be happening!

Peter frowns up at Tony, his eyebrows furrowing in frustration. "Can't be 'dopted 'till my Daddy now isn't my Daddy. Harley say he not, but I wanna be sure jus' in case. You my new Daddy though. Didn't 'ou know?" He questioned, looking legitimately perplexed that Tony wasn't aware of their new relation. "Ha'ley say our Daddies aren't real Daddies, and that you're our real Daddy now 'cause you love us."

Tony's heart jumps into his throat.

"I did not say that! He took that completely out of context!" Harley shouts, jumping from his bed to rush across the room. "I didn't say that I swear!"

Tony's face doesn't relax. His eyes remain wide and his mouth stays dry as he looks between each child. "Ex-excuse me? I'm what?" He still couldn't quite get past *that* part.

"You're our Daddy," Peter states again with an air of confidence, "Ha'ley said so."

"I did not you little brat!" Harley moves closer to the bed with a threatening growl, glaring menacingly down at the tiny boy. "You're a liar!"

"M not!" Peter shouts venomously. "Tony 's esatly what you say a Daddy is!"

“Okay, okay that’s enough,” Tony placates through a large huff. He reaches out to push Harley away from the bed with a firm arm and focuses in on Peter.

“Petey, um...” He’s startled by the loud slam of the bedroom door. He turns to find a closed door and no Harley. He feels instant guilt, but Peter grabs onto the collar of his shirt and tugs so his attention is focused on him once more.

“You love me right Tony?” Peter questions innocently.

“Uh... well-”

“‘Cause I love you. I love you more than my Mama loved me... which is a whole lot.”

Tony’s heart is hammering and his mouth is now clumping with sticky saliva.

“Y-yeah um. Yeah, Pete. I guess I do.”

Peter grins, lifting both arms towards him. So, Tony humors him and hugs him. Peter wraps his arms around his neck and nuzzles into his cheek. “You ‘eally are my Daddy. I don' wanna wait for my fat'er to be gone. I love you.”

Tony clears his throat awkwardly, unsure of how to respond, but Peter just blinked up at him and smiled.

“G’night Daddy.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so... I have a few announcements that I'm excited about.

First things first. I know this chapter is kinda just a way to pacify and indulge my sweet fluffy needs, but I plan to develop the plot a bit more in future chapters. Maybe not the next one exactly, but there will be at least a little bit to go ahead and get stuff moving in the right direction. All these chapters I was kinda just me getting a feel for the story and characters in general, and I think I know what I want to do with it now.

Which brings me to my second point. This is the first part of a three part series (god the thought of that kind of commitment makes me wanna gag. Yuck! Fingers crossed). I have a lot planned and my hope is to include all of it... because there is so much I can do and it's really so exciting what I have planned. I have the next two titles planned out as well, which might give you a hint as to what might happen. I won't tell you unless you ask cuz I don't wanna spoil it for anyone. By the way things are looking right now a lot of people might think it'd be dumb to base three long fics on one plot, but trust me when I say this (as a hardcore Tony Stark IronDad fan) if I can stick to it, the end result will be absolutely epic.

Okay, another thing (I know, I know. This is a lot. Just bare with me for a moment). I have never done a project this huge... The longest fic I've ever done is a little less than 200k and it I barely finished it. So I request your patience and that you put faith in my OCD to not leave things unfinished. That being said. Any encouragement or ideas to offer would be lovely.

And Lastly, which may very well be the most important... is this even worth it? Would it actually be worth my time to pursue this? Be honest with me. Cuz I don't wanna write this whole long thing if nobody thinks a story based off an AU like this would be interesting. So let me know.

Alright, I'm done. I know that was a lot. I just needed to put it all out there. Lemme know your thoughts about it :) And thanks everyone so much for reading, especially if you made it to the end of these ridiculously long chapter notes. Love and Kudos to you for your dedication. Thank you so much.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Okay I know I said more plot... and there is! There is a bit more plot... just not a lot. I got distracted alright! DX I told you guys I get distracted easy, so here's some more fluff/hurtcomfort,

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony's head falls into her lap, lungs burning from the repressed whimpers scratching roughly at his throat.

"You're going to be absolutely amazing Tony," she hummed with a smile as she carded her fingers through his soft hair. "You'll tackle fatherhood like you do everything else: perfectly. And the fact that you're scared shitless that you might mess up is a good sign. That means you'll do everything you can not to mess up." She felt another tear fall onto her bare thigh. "Do you think Howard was ever this worried about being a bad father to you? Do you think he sat in bed and cried because he was worried you would hate him?"

Tony shook his head and Pepper smiled, tucking a small tuft of hair behind his ear.

*"Of course not. He wouldn't have done the things he did to you and your mother if he had. He didn't love like you, Tony. He didn't know how. You're already better than him, Honey. You're better than him at everything you've ever done. You've proven to the world time and time again that you are **better**. You are a better man than he could ever be. Why is this going to be any different?"*

"I-I don't know Pep," Tony whispered hoarsely. "All I know about being a dad is... it's-it's bad. It's all bad. I don't know how to be good. I just-- what if-- what if I can't help it? I can't-- they're gonna hate me. I know it Pep. I do."

"No, they won't Tony," Pepper soothed, "they won't. I promise. They'll love you even if you mess up every once in a while because that's what a family does. We love each other."

Tony rolls over so his face is pressed up close to her stomach. He reaches up a hand to stroke her flat belly through the fabric of her shirt. He smiles softly and tucks his head closer to press a quick kiss to her stomach, right above the waistband of her sweatpants.

"I love 'em already Pep. I do. So, I'm-I'm gonna try..."

"That's all I'm asking Baby."

Tony recalls the memory with a fond smile as he leans back against the door of Peter's closed bedroom door. It calms his erratic breathing and he can feel a wave of relief wash over him at the reminder of his wife's kind words from years prior. The situation is so strangely similar and his fears are all the same. He doesn't cry though; not like he did that night. There was no dry heaving or full-body tremors because this time was different, right? There is no reason to be afraid of the daunting responsibilities of fatherhood. Peter is probably just confused like any other four-year-old would be when it came to complicated situations like this. And he shouldn't panic anyway. There was no threat of danger, so there was no reason to be scared. He *shouldn't* be scared because of a few ignorant words of a four-year-old; he's *not* scared.

But he still doesn't think he'll ever be able to forget that night. It was the first time Pepper had ever seen him cry... it was the first time he had ever felt such an all-encompassing sting of pure terror; something he hadn't experienced since he was a young child. It was an unfamiliar sensation that had his heart palpitating against his chest like a jackhammer. The fear of becoming what his father had been had seemed far more powerful than the fear of all the terrible things he's seen in life. He could laugh in a man's face as he hung limply by his hands, absorbing beatings and bullet wounds, teeth being pulled, and fingers on the verge of snapping in half, and still be hardheaded enough to spit a disgusting glob of blood in their face. He'd done it before. Yet, the fear of having the one thing he loved the most in the world to hate him as much as he had his own father was so much more unbearable than the worst torture he'd ever experienced. The fear of losing control... the fear of doing something that he would regret. It had sent him spiraling into a blind panic because he just *couldn't* wrap his mind around it. Around *the thought* of inflicting pain onto the one person he was supposed to love and cherish for the rest of his life.

It was the prospect of innocence. The idea that a tiny, innocent human being would rely on him, trust him, and love because it didn't know better than not to hate him. Just like Peter... he hadn't known he hated his father until he experienced what love and care were supposed to be and was taught right from wrong so he could come to the realization that everything he'd known in his short life was *wrong*. That he had been tricked and manipulated into thinking that cruelty was simply an eccentric form of love.

And-and Tony... he really wasn't any better than Richard Parker.

Heck, he was exactly the same. He's a criminal, a murderer, drug dealer, evil scientist, loan shark... he was psychotic; deadly. He killed and he killed and never felt any remorse for the lives he had taken. So who was to say the same wouldn't happen when it came to his child. Who's to

say his father and Richard hadn't started the same way as him: dead set on being good... and then life caught up to them. Who's to say he wouldn't lose his temper and lash out? No child should be raised by a man like himself. No child should look up to him like that. They shouldn't be raised in the environment he thrived in. He was cruel and selfish... and Pepper loved him too much to admit to herself that he's a bad person; always has been and always will be. He knows a thousand different ways to kill a man... Possibly killed that many too. He was *bad*. Bad for a child. Bad for Harley. Bad for Peter. Bad for Morgan...

The rapidly increasing declarations of self-contempt reminded him of the argument that had ensued in his head after Pepper had told him she was pregnant the first time. He remembered the late nights spent pacing and muttering to himself in his office when his wandering mind wouldn't allow him to sleep peacefully through the night. He had debated having the child put up for adoption after he was born, potentially pitting them off onto a civilian couple worthy of his child's untainted love. He had known it would devastate Pepper... known it could have even potentially driven her away from him forever, but he just didn't think he could- he didn't want to risk ruining them the way his father had ruined him.

The internal debate had continued for months. It consumed him at all turns. He couldn't sleep; couldn't function. He drowned himself in work. He searched for the bad people, hoping if he could cleanse at least a little bad out of the world, the good could balance out his bad and it wouldn't matter so much... the logic hadn't made sense but he still continued killing and killing and killing over and over and over. Child molesters, rapists, abusers, murderers, human traffickers, liars and cheats, corrupt rich men, and several petty criminals he would find while walking down the street after a long night. He killed so many, but it hadn't been enough to ease his guilt of existing. So, he soon found himself plastered or stoned more often than not. That continued until Pepper was kidnapped by Aldrich Killian, a man seeking revenge for Tony's righteous deeds in outing his human experimentation to the authorities after the man had gone far enough to experiment on a *child*. An innocent child. The man had been lucky Tony hadn't gotten to him first... he should have killed him instead of shown him such kind mercy...

So, in retaliation, the psychotic man took Pepper from him, plucked her off the street during her morning walk like she was a flower. Her and the baby. His baby. The baby boy that would have been his son had he been paying better attention to the life outside of his own bubble of self-hate.

Tony felt his throat tighten at the awful memory, and he pressed a hand to his face. He remembered that it wasn't until the moment Rhodey had burst into his office to break the news of what had happened that Tony finally made his final decision regarding his son. He had been scared; terrified; petrified. He was terrified that he would never see his wife again; that he would never get to hold his son in his arms. That moment of pure terror had cemented his decision. The idea of being without him was too much to bear. He loved him, he wanted him here with him and Pepper, bouncing in his crib first thing in the morning, wearing a bright smile when his young eyes landed on him in the doorway. He loved his son, and Aldrich had taken him; him and Pepper. So, after his short panic, the terror was soon written over by a fit of protective anger and Tony screamed, shouted, and hollered orders as he marched through the entire Tower. Determined to get his son and his wife back home so he could love them both like he should have been all along.

He had been too late though.

He could see it in Pepper's eyes when she fell into his arms, tired and weak, but he refused to think of such an outrageous possibility because surely his son was alright. He had to be. He brought Pepper home, tucked her into their bed, doted on her and kissed her over and over and over again. He breathed her name and smelled her hair and stroked her stomach, only to be halted by her hand wrapped tightly around his wrist.

"Tony," she had whispered, so softly and so broken Tony almost didn't hear her. "He's gone. I lost him. He's gone, Baby."

He didn't cry, or mourn, he just sat back on the bed and stared. He had stared down at her hand around his *left* wrist... but he didn't care. There was an odd feeling in his heart that he just couldn't quite place, an emptiness that had been so quick to overrun the budding love for his son. The love was gone and he missed it more than he thought he could. He- he remembered that he didn't say a word for the rest of the night, simply content to hold Pepper tightly in his arms as she sobbed into his chest.

He's still not over it...not completely. His son would have turned two years old last month, but the past is in the past, and he has Morgan coming now. A baby girl... and-and now he has Peter too. Maybe. The boy's logic still astounded him and he couldn't seem to decide if he should hop onto the wagon of weird logic or not. There was a weird controversy. He shouldn't enable Peter's illusions, but at the same time, perhaps enabling it would help him heal and forget... He found himself wishing for things to be as simple as Peter made them to be. He felt a longing to accept Peter into their odd little family because he oh so desperately wanted one... he'd been wanting one ever since his little boy left this empty bubble of loneliness in his heart.

Perhaps that was why Pepper had felt so attached to Peter. Perhaps that was why *he* found himself attached as well. They were all seeking for something they had lost.

Peter had lost his father, so he had called him Daddy because he wanted a new one... the poor kid probably didn't even know what having a father meant. He had said Harley told him so... but then Harley said he didn't... It was all probably some huge misunderstanding that Pepper would have to effortlessly fix when it came morning. He knew he wasn't Peter's father (no matter how much he found himself wanting to be). He knew that. But apparently Peter didn't, and the fact that the kid had said that more out of a desperate call for love than an actual belief will make it even harder for Tony to accept that this wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

He pushed away from the door and stood up straight. He wiped the water droplets in the corners of

his eyes away with his forefinger and thumb then cleared his throat to pull himself back together. He rolled his shoulders and sniffed. He was fine. It was just an overreaction to an innocent profession after a long, emotionally draining day. The kid was just looking for a rebound father after practically sentencing his own to death. *A rebound father* ... the thought made Tony chuckle under his breath.

He slowly turned on his heel to head further down the hall to his own bedroom, but he stopped before he could take a step. What about Harley? Where was Harley? The kid had run out in an angry panic during his slightly one-sided *discussion* with Peter. Had he offended the kid in some way? Or was it just embarrassment? Anger probably. The kid seemed to be more angry than not lately.

So, instead of wandering back to his room where Pepper was waiting he turned back around and headed towards the entrance of the hallway which leads out into the living room. He spotted the dark silhouette of a large lump on his couch, slightly illuminated by the lamp in the corner of the room. He paused at the end of the corridor and sighed softly. Harley was curled beneath the blanket, pressed into the corner of the couch, and Tony could see his small tremors even in the dimly lit room.

“Harley?” He started slowly, taking a soft step towards the couch.

The boy doesn’t respond verbally, but the quaking does come to an abrupt halt. Then, as if suddenly poked with a hot branding iron, the kid leaps off the couch in a panic. The blanket is launched violently across the room as Harley scrambles over the back of the couch.

“Leave me alone!” He shouts, wiping furiously at his eyes as he bolts across the room, in the opposite direction Tony was approaching.

Tony says nothing. His head simply drops in reproachful sorrow, and his eyes follow the kid’s trail across the room.

It isn’t until Harley reaches the elevator that Tony understands what his plan was. He finds his instincts kicking into gear. He couldn’t just let this kid *leave* when he was obviously upset. Who knew what he would do... and Tony got the feeling that in his moment of panic, the kid wouldn’t hesitate to make a run for it. So, Tony found himself taking quick purposeful strides towards the elevator as the kid desperately punched his thumb onto the call elevator button repeatedly.

“J, lock it down,” Tony instructs firmly, eyebrows turning downward.

Harley looks at him in a panic, and Tony can see the fear-driven tears pouring from his swollen eyes. Tony comes close and the kid turns to face the elevator and throws his body against the metal doors. “No. No! NO! Lemme go! Open! OPEN JARVIS OPEN! Lemme out of here! No!” His fists bang loudly on the large doors as he screams, but they didn’t budge. Tony reaches him and wraps an arm around his waist, pulling him away from the elevator, but Harley fights against him.

“No! No lemme go you bastard! Leave me alone!” He struggles against Tony’s grip, and Tony grits his teeth together as he adjusts his arms so he can hold onto him as he drags him away from the elevator. Harley kicks and punches, throwing his weight onto and against Tony to try and trip him, but it doesn't work. Tonys too sturdy to be budged. It doesn't take but a couple more yards for Tony to get fed up with the wild antics. He spins the kid around to face him and grips Harley’s upper arms to give him a good shake.

“Shut up kid! You’re gonna wake Peter.” His voice is thick and gravelly through his loud whisper, and Harley immediately stops struggling at the harsh tone. Tony glares down at him, but Harley doesn’t shrink away. Nope. Instead, he returns Tony’s harsh glare with a scowl and a forceful tug of his shoulder in a measly attempt to escape.

“What the hell's gotten into you?” Tony questions with a quiet growl.

Harley tugs again, but Tony rights him once more with another good shake. “Leave me alone. You’re not my dad.” The boy spat venomously.

“Never said I was,” Tony responded easily with a slight challenging quirk of his brow. “Now are you going to tell me what’s goin’ on here?”

Harley’s tearful scowl falters for a moment. His chin quivers and his eyes avert from Tony’s as he continues tugging fruitlessly at the man's tight grip. “Jus’-jus’ please,” he sobs quietly, “jus’ leave me alone.”

Tony thinks about it for just a moment. He thinks about releasing the kid and letting him go downstairs to hide out in the tiny quarters Happy had assigned to him, and then assigning guards at all the exits to make sure he doesn't try and make a run for it... He considers it. He really does. But then the kid's entire body shakes so violently that he would have keeled over if Tony hadn’t been holding onto him so tightly. He looks down at the kid. He looks at the way his old band t-shirt was practically drowning the kid and his scrawny limbs. He was a kid. He was still a *kid* . Tony was the adult. Adults were supposed to keep kids safe... and there was something wrong with this kid. So, Tony didn’t let him go. Instead, he bows his head to catch the kid’s eyes and he removes one hand to reach up and cup the side of the boy’s neck.

“Tell me what’s bothering you Kiddo.”

Harley simply shakes his head.

Tony wants to groan. He wants to solve the problem so he could go to bed and sleep off the day's exhaustion, but the kid was ridiculously stubborn. So, instead, he dragged the boy over to the sofa and pushed him down to sit before he took the seat next to him.

“Does this have anything to do with what Peter said? I know that topic is kinda sensitive to you...”

“That’s not-!” Harley started abruptly before cutting himself off. “It’s just... that’s not what I told him. He made it sound like I was saying you were our dad. And I *didn’t* say that. I promise Boss. I didn’t tell him that.”

“Could you quite with the Boss crap, Kid? It’s driving me insane.”

Harley scoffed at him and crossed his arms over his chest. “What do you want me to call you then? You’ve already ruled out 'sir'. And I'm not calling you Mr. Stark. That just sounds stupid. How about Mr. Mechanic? Or Sir. Genius Mastermind the Fourth?”

Tony side-eyed him, the corner of his mouth quirking up into an amused smile. Harley returned it with a smug smirk of his own.

“Tony’ll do fine,” Tony answered with a simple shrug, relaxing back into the cushions of the couch.

“You told me I wasn’t allowed to call you that,” Harley pointed out.

Tony scoffed. “When in the world did I tell you that?”

“In the car on the night we were going to meet up with Rogers.”

Tony thought about it for a moment to try and recall the events and he frowned. "Well, I changed my mind..." Then he smiled. "Though I'm kinda fond of the name Mr. Mechanic now."

Harley pushed at his shoulder playfully.

Tony felt a tinge of relief by the familiar gesture and turned to look at the kid, hoping to find the problem and the angsty mood fixed. But the boy seemed to realize what he had done and was already retreating into his shell again. Tony sighed dejectedly and dropped his head to rest on the back of the couch. "Alright. Why don't you tell me about you and Pete's little misunderstanding? Maybe that way we can clear some things up, 'cause I was kinda left in the dark, and it kinda freaked me out a bit. I have no idea where any of this is coming from."

Harley casts him a strange look. "I never said you were our dad. I didn't say that."

"Yes. You've said that many times," Tony sighs, repressing the urge to scowl. "Just tell me what you *did* say."

Harley sighed again and threw himself into the couch dramatically. "He just asked about my dad, and I told him I didn't have a dad, 'cause my father was a dick. He got all confused about the difference between dads and fathers, and I get that it's not really a thing... but to me having a dad is a lot different than just having a father. And-and I tried explaining that to him by saying that dads don't treat their kids like crap, and-and that my father had treated me and my sister like crap so technically I don't have a real dad." Harley stopped abruptly to take a couple of breaths. "Then-then he got all curious and stuff and asked what my dad had done to me, and I said something stupid and told him it was kinda the same stuff his dad did to him, 'cause I didn't wanna start talkin' all 'bout my traumas and crap."

Tony nodded along, trying his best to follow the speedy rambling falling from the boy's mouth.

"And then he got all worried about not having a real dad too and I told him that sometimes you could have a dad that wasn't your real father... y'know, like adoption and stuff. And he got super excited which I thought was good 'cause I didn't want him to be all upset after what happened today. He started askin' 'bout dads and what they did and I told him! I just told him what dads are supposed to do y'know about lovin' him and huggin' him and teachin' him stuff... keepin' him safe and happy... and-and he just jumped to conclusions and declared that you were our new dad since you... since you did most of the things that dads were supposed to do.... And yeah. That's it. He's just... he's just super smart for a kid I guess."

“See, now was that so hard?” Tony smiled.

Harley looked at him and his brows furrowed in confusion. “You’re not mad?”

“Why in the world would I be mad?”

Harley shrugged. “I don’t know...”

Tony eyes him. The boy’s still hunkered in on himself, avoiding eye contact. There’s something else bothering him it seemed. He found himself leaning forward and he reached out to place a hand on his knee.

“Talk to me kid.”

Harley looked up at him with fresh tears shining in his eyes. *Dear God, so many tears tonight* . “I just...” he started helplessly. Tony scooted closer. “You’re so different... it’s scary.” Tony would never admit it, but that one hurt... the kid was scared of him. “I-I-I just don’t know what to expect from you... or-or what you expect from meI-I’m so used to being pushed around y’know. I’m used to the yelling and the hitting and the- and the not caring... I’m not- I’m not used to all this.” He gestures to the space around them.

“You’re scared of change.” Tony reasoned with an understanding smile. Harley chuckled and wiped away the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand.

“I guess you could call it that.”

“Hmm,” Tony hummed, removing his hand from the kid's knee. “Well... you would never get anywhere in life kid if nothing ever changed.”

“Is that the quote of the day on your kitty calendar, old man?” Harley snarked, wrinkling his nose devilishly.

“You’re a brat,” Tony laughed, shoving him in the shoulder. “Here I am tryin’ to make you feel better and you’re making fun of me. This is the first time I’ve ever done this too y’know. I’m as new to this whole thing as you are.”

“Sorry,” Harley smiled.

“No you’re not.”

“I guess I’m not.”

Tony smiled warmly at him and tossed an arm around his shoulders to pull him in for a quick side hug. It was meant to be playful and reassuring, but he felt the boy tense up at the close contact. Tony didn't let him go right away. “Is this- is this by any chance related to your aversion to my kindness?”

“I-I-I guess I-I...” Harley cuts himself off and sighs. He tries pulling away from Tony to escape the comforting embrace, but Tony pulls him back and forces him to look him in the eyes.

“Tell me what’s bothering you and maybe I can fix it.”

“You can’t fix something like this Tony,” Harley sighed with a roll of his eyes. “It’s called having abandonment and trust issues. I think it takes years of therapy to fix something like this.” Tony can feel the boy’s entire body go stiff, but he doesn’t say a word, hoping the silence would urge the kid to speak more.

“And y’know... being a teenager doesn’t help a lot with the degrading self-image either.” The kid slumps against him, head lolling to the side to fall onto his shoulder. He seemed to give up the restraint on accepting comfort and affection and decided to slowly welcome it with open arms. Surely it couldn't be that bad if it felt so good. Felt so safe. “I know- I know how this life is supposed to work. I get it. I understand it, but I don’t understand this. *This* isn’t part of our world. It’s different and-and it’s nice and-and I hate it. I hate it ‘cause-’cause I used to have something like this and-and it was all ruined because of me and-and it broke me and I just don’t want that to happen again.”

“It won’t--” Tony starts, only to be cut off.

“But it will! It will!” Harley argues loudly, wrenching himself from Tony’s grip and standing from the couch. “It always will ‘cause bad people don’t deserve to be happy. And sometimes I just wish that I was good so I could have something like this and not be afraid of losing it or ruining it.”

Tony pauses as he’s hit with the sudden realization that this kid has been struggling with the same turmoil he’s been experiencing since the first moment he found out about Pepper’s first pregnancy. And the thought that this kid could feel like a bad person... it seemed ridiculous.

“You’re not a bad person Kid.”

“You don’t know anything about me, Stark. I’ve done things you’ve killed a man for. I’m not this innocent little kid you keep making me out to be. You don’t *know* .”

That takes Tony by surprise and he stands, frowning at the boy’s snappish tone and dark insinuation.

“I know enough. It’s part of my job to know who I can trust, and I hate to say it kid, but you’re one of my best. I wouldn’t be letting you up here, sleeping up here no less, hanging around my pregnant wife if I didn’t think I could trust you...” he steps forward and grabs the kid by the shoulders. “I know this line of work better than anybody else kid. I know it’s sometimes scary to think that everything could be ripped away from you after one mistake... and I-I *understand* kid. I really do. But one thing I learned over the years... there’s no such thing as good and bad. The world’s not just all black and white. There’s bad within everyone, it’s just masked better by some people.” Tony pauses and takes a deep breath. “You just gotta learn who you can trust, alright?”

Harley nods slowly, arms lifting to cross over his chest.

Tony sighs and lifts a hand to run it through the boy’s hair, hoping to offer some comfort like Pepper was so natural at providing. His lips quirk up when the kid’s head involuntarily jerks into his hand to prolong the contact. “I get that you might not be used to all this yet, but just know that you got people in your corner now, okay? Nobody’s gonna hurt you and nothing is expected of you, okay? You’ve still got 3 years of childhood to enjoy, and I want you to have the opportunity to experience it as best you can considering the circumstances.” Tony pulls him close and finds himself rocking from side to side. Harley melts into him, arms reaching around to hug him back. “I want to give you something I was never able to have... I want to do that for you because I know from experience that it’s something you need, okay? I’m gonna try and help you experience that. Going through life scared to connect to anyone isn’t any way for a child to live... now... I’m still working on that too. So how about we work on that together, huh?”

Harley nods against him, hugging Tony tighter. Tony smiles and rubs his back.

“What if I...” Harley’s voice is hoarse as he whispers softly into the man’s chest. “What if I mess up? What if I’ve already messed up too bad to be a kid anymore?”

“Then I’ll forgive you, and I’ll help you,” Tony responds easily. “I already forgive you for whatever terrible thing it is that you think you’ve done.”

Harley’s face presses closer into his chest and he shakes his head.

“You don’t even know what I did Tony.”

Tony's chest rattles dangerously. “I don’t have to. I can tell you regret it, and that’s enough punishment as is. Now, how about we get you off to bed hm? I think Happy’s gonna start up your training again tomorrow. Big day for you, huh?”

“Yeah,” Harley nods, slowly peeling himself away from the embrace. But Tony keeps an arm around the kid’s shoulders as they walk. “Umm. You think you can come by at some point to watch? I-I’ve been practicing with YouTube.” Tony can’t see it, but he can practically hear the kid’s face flush in embarrassment.

“Yeah. I think I can arrange that.”

Tony leads him to the bedroom, opening the door softly so he wouldn’t wake Peter. He pulls the kid towards the empty bed and pushes him gently towards the mattress as he peels the comforter back.

“I’m-” Harley starts, watching as Tony arranges the pillows of his bed, but Tony cuts him off.

“I know. I get it. You don’t gotta be tucked in. You’re not a little kid. Just humor me, okay? I need the practice.” He tossed the kid a wry smile and pats the pillow.

Harley smirks as he moves to lay down on the pillow. “I was gonna say I’m sorry for freaking out

on you, but whatever.”

Tony whacks him softly in the chest and the kid laughs as Tony pulled the blankets over his body and tucks them around the kid’s chin. “Shut up you little shit. I just dived way outside my comfort zone to give you a little heart-to-heart. Be appreciative.”

“I know- I know I’m sorry... but um.”

Tony lifted a brow and leans away from the bed after finishing with the blankets. “But what?”

“But um... You don’t gotta be my dad. I’m cool with the way things are.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tony nodded. “Didn’t expect you to want me to be. Don’t blame ya.” He ruffles the kid’s hair and moves to leave, but Harley’s hand shoots out to grab his right wrist.

“Wait- um. That’s not what I meant. You’d- You’d be a great dad. I just--”

“You just don’t need one. I understand kid. I’ll be whatever you need me to be kid. You and Peter gosh- You two got me goin’ all soft,” Tony rolled his eyes at the thought. “But... talk to me whenever your ready talk. I’ll be there to listen. Pepper too.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Harley smiled. He waits for Tony to reach the doorway before he speaks up again. “Night Tony.”

And Tony turns around to smile back. “Night kid. Now go to sleep or I’ll make you train with Natasha.”

Harley drops his head on the pillow and immediately closes his eyes. He doesn’t think he stopped smiling until he slipped into sleep.

“Pepper. Honey?” Tony began slowly, tiptoeing into the room wearing a sheepish smile.

Pepper looks at him from over her tablet and frowns. The look on her husband’s face was all too familiar. “What did you do Tony?”

Tony’s mouth opens and closes a couple of times before it snaps shut. He rushes across the room and drapes himself across their bed so he could reach out and grab her hand. “What’re your thoughts on kids?”

Pepper looks at him for a moment, trying to determine if he’s officially lost his goddamned mind or not. But she responds softly anyhow, just in case. “Tony. Sweetie.” She lays a hand on her stomach and strokes the back of his hand. “I think it’s a bit late for us to be having this conversation.”

Tony rolls his eyes at his own awkwardness. “No-no that’s not... that’s not what I meant. I meant *the* kids. What do you think about the kids?”

“Harley and Peter?” Pepper asks slowly. Tony nods his head. “Well, I think they’re wonderful Honey... why do you ask?”

Tony sits up and rests his back against the headboard. He has varying thoughts on how he wants this conversation to go down. All he knows is that Pepper needs to know because she sometimes knows what he needs and wants better than he does. “Well, Pete thinks I’m his new Dad... and...” he looks up to see Pepper’s eyes widen, but she doesn’t say a word. “He um. He got the idea from Harley. And-and I talked to the kid a bit and y’know, he’s still all embarrassed and angry about life... but I kinda got the vibe that he... that he thinks the same thing... he refuses to admit it though...”

Pepper grabs his hand and squeezes. “Okay. Well, how are you feeling about this? I know you’ve always kinda been freaked out by the idea of being a father and-and I know this is all kind of sudden.”

“It’s not like I hate it. But I don’t like it either. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do... it’s not like- it’s not like they can go anywhere else. And-and I think Pete deserves to have the family he’s asking for, y’know. It’s the least we can do for him.”

Pepper smiles. “I agree. And you know, I didn’t tell you this because I didn’t know how you would

react... but Peter called me his Mama a while back.”

Tony’s grin is bright and infectious. “Really?”

“Yes. He just needs a little love and I think that’s something we can give him.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” Tony’s breath of relief seemed to melt away the anxiety. He sank down onto the mattress and rolled onto his side so he could reach out and stroke her stomach. “Sometimes I forget that I’m supposed to be a hardass. You and these kids are really domesticating me.” He laughed and kissed her shirt several times. “I don’t think a man in my position should be freaking out just ‘cause a little kid called him Daddy.”

Pepper combed a hand through his hair. “Hmm. Well, you’ve always been an anomaly Honey. That’s why I love you.”

“What?” Tony scoffed sarcastically, “‘cause I’m so in touch with my feelings?”

“Nope. The exact opposite,” Pepper smiled complacently. “It’s kinda fun to watch you torment a man for hours then come home to see you do a full turnaround and torment yourself about being a good father. You’re like a cute little squirrel unsure whether you should cross the road.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up.” Tony groaned. “At least I’m not just a bastard all the time like that two-faced piece of crap downstairs. Gosh, I think I hate him more now than I did before he got here.”

“I’m sure the feeling’s mutual... but yes, he’s quite infuriating, isn’t he?”

Tony sat up, and his entire demeanor changed from joking to irritated. “Yeah, I know. He screams like a little girl and he cries like a baby, but he won’t just answer my goddamned questions so I could just go ahead and kill ‘im. Gosh, I just wanna kill him so bad.”

“That’s why he won’t talk Tony. He doesn’t wanna die. As soon as he tells you what you want to hear, he knows he’s dead. He’s a coward.”

“Yeah,” Tony huffed in agreement. “Either that or he’s puttin’ on a whole show. Probably waiting for Ross or Osborn to send the calvary or something. I should just kill him... maybe Osborn will be more willing to answer my questions.”

Pepper shrugs and picks her tablet back up to get back to work. “Perhaps. But I’m sure after you’ve had a few sessions with him you’ll get what you want. I know you’ve broken men more stubborn than him. Just be patient Honey.”

“I don’t wanna be patient, Pepper,” Tony groaned. “Y’know, contrary to popular belief, I don’t enjoy it when I get blood all over my hands and clothes. It leaves this weird smell and this itchy feeling under my nails. I prefer the jobs where I can just shoot ‘em between the eyes and call up Maria to do the cleanup.”

“Hmm, yes.” Pepper nods distractedly, “because you’re lazy. Speaking of lazy,” she twists to face him and she turns the tablet around to show him the spreadsheet she was looking at. “Have you been ignoring the books? Carl Santiago owes you over \$50,000 and he’s due for payment.”

Tony waves a hand at her. “I’ve got it handled Babe, promise. We’ve just been a bit swamped with the whole Hydra thing goin’ on. As soon as I got a clear schedule, I’ll send out Asher or someone to give him a little reminder.”

“Well, you better do it soon. I liked him; if he waits to pay much longer you’re gonna have to give him an incentive.”

“Yes sweetheart, I know--”

There was a soft knock on their door and they both pause to turn and look.

“Must be Harley,” Tony mumbles. “Just put the kid to bed. Let ‘im in J.”

The door opens and Tony was right. There stood Harley in their doorway, but he wasn’t alone. He held Peter in his arms, tiny head tucked into his shoulder, and Harley stepped into the room to approach their bed.

“He had a nightmare I think. He woke up cryin’ for you guys.” He made it halfway to the bed before Pepper was tossing her tablet to the side and waving him over with open arms. The closer he came to the bed, the easier it was to notice Peter’s tiny shoulders trembling.

“Baby,” Pepper cooed softly, taking Peter from Harley’s arms when the boy loosened his hold to be transferred into her arms.

“Mommy,” Peter wailed with a pitiful snuffle, face puckering in a sob as he wrapped his arms around her neck. Tony leaned over, hip digging into the bed so he could rub Peter’s back softly. Pepper petted his hair and pressed several kisses to his forehead.

“It’s okay now Baby. Look, Mommy and Daddy are right here.” She rocked him back and forth, hand flattening against the back of his head to press his face into her chest. “It’s okay Baby. You’re safe.”

Harley shuffled awkwardly beside the bed, unsure if he was supposed to wait to be dismissed or if he should just leave. But before he could retreat back to the bedroom, Pepper looked up and reached her hand out to him. Harley hesitated for a moment, but then he reached out to take her proffered hand.

Pepper pulled him forward and he stumbled closer, bending at the waist far enough so Pepper could kiss his forehead. “Thank you, Sweetheart, for bringing him to us.” Harley didn’t straighten right away. Instead, his eyes turned glossy as he looked down at Pepper with wide eyes, something akin to regret flickering behind his dilated pupils. Pepper simply smiled and reached up to comb through the hair at the back of his head. “You need your sleep Honey. Why don’t you go back to bed, hm?” When Harley didn’t move right away she hummed softly in thought. Tony sat silently, attention focused solely on Peter.

“Unless you’d like to stay here with us for a little while? We wouldn’t mind Sweetheart. We’d understand.” That statement seemed to snap Harley back out of his stupor. His spine straightened abruptly, effectively knocking Pepper’s hand away from his hair. He shook his head resolutely with a mechanical snap of his neck going back and forth. His eyes didn’t move away from Pepper’s as he slowly backed away from the bed until he spun on his heel and rushed out of the room with his head bowed, chin tucked close to his chest. Pepper watched the door after he left just in case he returned, but she was brought back to the moment when she heard Tony’s awkward reassurances of “*it’s okay Bubba.*”

“Mama, Mommy,” Peter sobbed, pulling away from her chest so he could look her in the face. “It so bad. So, so bad.”

“What was bad, Baby?”

Peter lifted his fists to rub at his eyes, upper lip being drawn into his mouth with every quivering intake of breath. "My-my-my-my fa-fat'her too' me from-from you and Daddy!" He devolved into a pile of violent sobs, and his arms lifted towards Tony. "Da-da-daddy! I-I don' wanna go! I-I don't!"

Tony leans forward and pulls him into a tight embrace. He finds his own chest quaking with an odd mix of dejection and fury as he lies back against the mattress with Peter cradled safely against him. "I'll never let anyone take you away from me, Bug. Nobody. Ever. Okay? You don't have to be scared. Me and..." he pauses and glances at Pepper. He swallows around a lump in his throat then closes his eyes and presses his nose into Peter's hair. "Me an' Mama are here to keep you safe. Always."

Pepper woke up to a finger tapping her cheek. Her eyes blink open slowly with a tired sigh as she rolled onto her back. Her vision clears enough to see Peter's form looming over her, grinning and wide awake.

"Petey, baby, why are you awake?"

"Can we have panca'es for b'eakfast?"

Pepper groans and rubs a hand down her face as she turns her head to look at the clock on her bed stand. 7:30 on the dot. "Petey," she yawns, "go bother your Daddy for a bit. Mama needs her sleep."

She can hear Tony grunt from beside her, but he doesn't move. Peter is settled between the both of them, glancing between them both.

Pepper kicks Tony beneath the sheets. "Tony, go get your son some breakfast."

Tony groans and rolled to his other side so his back was to her. "Sorry Honey, my legs don't start working until after 8 o'clock. I've got work to do today so... I need... I need sleep." She swears he starts to snore as soon as he trails off and she finds her nose crinkling in irritation, but she lays there, hoping Peter might get the hint.

“Mama?” Peter questioned, poking her in the cheek once more. “I’m hungry.”

Pepper sighed dramatically and began peeling back the sheets from her body. “Okay, okay. C’mon, let’s go get started on breakfast. But be quiet, Harley may still be sleeping.” She holds Peter’s hand as the boy jumps down from their bed, and together they walk down the hallway until they reach the expanse melding into their living room. There they saw Harley curled up on the couch under the blanket he’d been using the previous night.

“Mama look!” Peter whispered loudly, pointing at Harley on the couch before pulling his hand back to press his finger to his mouth. “Gots to be shhh. He sleepin’.”

“That’s right Honey, he’s sleeping. Let’s go get started on breakfast.”

Pepper leads him into the kitchen and drags over a chair towards the counter for him to stand on. Then, she ties an apron around his little waist and together they get started mixing together all the ingredients for pancakes.

It doesn’t take long for the soft chattering and occasional clattering of pans to wake Harley up from his light sleep. He sits up abruptly, hair sticking out at weird places, and he blinks rapidly. He turns to face the kitchen, squinting to try and spot the source of all the noise.

“Good morning sleepyhead,” Pepper chirped, pouring batter onto the sizzling pan.

“Uhh, morning...” He yawns and stretches his arms above his head. Afterwards, he falls back against the couch, face pressed into the cushions of the couch.

Pepper chuckles and pushes away Peter’s hand gently when he reaches for the spatula in her hand. Then she hears the coffee maker turn on with a soft whirl. “Ope, looks like Tony’s awake.”

Peter’s head snaps to look over at the entrance of the hallway and he waits patiently for Tony to appear. When he doesn’t, he turns back to Pepper and looked at her as if she had made the most ultimate betrayal.

“No he’s not.”

Pepper smiles at him. “Yes he is. Look. He told JARVIS to get his coffee started.” She pointed to the coffee maker, and as if on cue, coffee begins to pour into the coffee cup resting beneath it.

“Ooooooh,” Peter chirps brightly. And, sure enough, Tony emerges from the depths of his bedroom a few moments later, hair awry, and frown on his face. He doesn’t look at all happy to be awake. Not at all. He grumbles a quick good morning, makes a grab for his cup of coffee, then retreats towards the couch. Peter watches him intensely, forgetting entirely about the pancakes as he braces his hands on the counter so he can better see over the ledge, into the living room.

Tony falls into the couch carefully, grunting like the old man he was, and takes a sip of his hot coffee. Harley slowly sits up and looks at him, but Tony’s eyes are closing again before he can even think of greeting the teen.

“Has someone brought up the paper yet?” He grumbles after a couple of moments, head craned backward to rest against the cushions of the couch.

“Not yet, sir,” JARVIS answers quickly. “Master Harley is typically the one sent to deliver your newspaper with Mr. Allen’s assistance, would you like to have someone else sent down to retrieve it.”

“Please,” Tony moaned, lifting his mug to his mouth once more to take another sip. Harley doesn’t say a word.

He drains the entire cup of coffee before a young man is stumbling into the penthouse with the newspaper in hand. Harley immediately throws himself under the blanket to hide when he spots the vaguely familiar face, and Tony accepts the paper with a thankful nod of his head. Nobody heard it, but he chuckled softly at Harley hiding under the blanket next to him.

The young guy leaves and Tony nudges Harley with his elbow and holds out his mug towards him. “Be a help and grab me another cup, would ya kid?”

Harley stares at him, unamused, but he takes the mug and gets up to refill it for him anyway as the man begins opening the paper. Peter darts past him on his trek towards the coffee machine and the boy leaps onto the couch with an endless amount of energy beaming off him from all directions.

“Daddy, guess what?” Peter jests, both hands braced on the man’s arm as he shuffles closer on his knees.

“Wha’s up Pete?” Tony indulges without looking up from the pages.

Peter leans forward to whisper as if it were a secret. He cups his hand around his mouth and Tony feels the tickle of his hot breath hit his ear. It made him want to wiggle away. “Me an’ Mama are makin’ panca’es.”

“Mmm,” Tony nods, “hope they’re good.”

Peter nods his head enthusiastically, and Tony vaguely registers that the kid is still wearing his floury apron, and the flour is getting all over his black tank top.

“Can I get my morning hug, p’ease?” Peter asks, bottom lip jutting out in a pout and his arms raised pitifully.

Tony sighs like it’s such a pain and lifts his arm to invite Peter to snuggle into his side. The kid doesn’t hesitate and nuzzled in close to him despite the fact he had been cuddled up to the man for nearly the entire night. Tony sniffed and dropped his arm back in place and grabbed ahold of the paper again, flicking his wrists to right the thin papers once more. Peter hums in contentment, cheek and palm rested against his chest as he scans the pages as well, but he couldn’t understand anything except the pictures.

Harley returns a few minutes later with Tony’s coffee and Tony happily accepts it from him. Everything is all and well. Pepper roped Harley into setting the table for breakfast, and Tony was nearly onto the second page of the paper, scanning over the latest news about himself or anything else in the world he should be worried about. That’s when JARVIS had to speak up and ruin the perfect domestic little atmosphere they had going.

“Sir, I believe there is something you would like to see.” The TV flickered on abruptly and Tony looks up to glance at the screen. He frowns at the grainy footage, broadcasting announcements flittering across the bottom of the screen. The video was of a dark room, focused in on the dark silhouette of a man, face concealed by the shadows in the dark room, yet bright grey fringes of his hair illuminated by an odd angle of light. It was eerie, and so, so, so cheezy Tony nearly rolled his eyes at the new wannabe supervillain that JARVIS was oh so concerned about. His voice was obviously changed with a typical gravelly voice modifier, but Tony wasn’t all that worried and he started focusing on the words the man was saying.

“There have been several rumors circling around regarding Hydra as of late. And according to all of these gossiped tales, Anthony Stark is apparently the clandestine leader of Hydra. I’m here to assure you that none of that is true. Of course, I am obviously a very private person myself, otherwise, most of the world would know who I was and what I do, but one thing is for certain... I do not enjoy credit being given to someone when it most definitely belongs to me. Especially not to a man such as Anthony Stark. So, President Ross, it would be so kind of you to stop spreading these false accusations and riling up the public to believe their precious Anthony is the villain he claims to be. Every man with a brain who knows Anthony surely knows he is incapable of leading such a powerful organization such as myself. His own is laughable; it brings disgrace to the Stark Legacy. The very *idea* is laughable really. So stop crediting a man of something so great when he goes around projecting this facade of strength and power when he is too weak to even begin imagining what the world could be with the proper guidance.” Tony frowns at the jackass on the screen. It’s obvious he’s doing all this for attention, and of course, he’s more than happy to accept this confession to clear his name, but still... really? Really? By then, Pepper was in the room as well, watching the TV with an amused smile on her lips. She’s obviously fairly amused as well.

But neither of the boys seem to be quite so entertained by the ordeal. Peter stares at the screen, eyes wide and fist curled into the fabric of Tony’s shirt. Pepper has Harley wrapped up in her arms, pulling him close so he could rest his head on her chest, but the boy continues watching the screen.

“Now, of course, I wouldn’t disrupt national television to come on here and yak about what could easily be interpreted as a hoax, so I’ve decided to provide everyone watching with a bit of proof.” The shadow on the man’s face shifts so his grinning mouth is clearly visible on the screen, and Tony gets an odd feeling... like maybe this isn’t quite as fake as he thought, because he can almost swear the man is staring right at him; right into his soul...

And there’s only one man he’s ever known capable of doing that...

“Say hi for the cameras, Anthony.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. I don't know what it is with me and super long chapters. I really don't get it, but I just can't seem to help myself. Anyways, this was kinda sorta very thrown together (especially the end, sry wanted to get it out tonight) cuz I was trying to fit in a bunch of minor details to do all that dumb foreshadow stuff people like during rereads. Whatever. Anyways. Thanks for reading. I'm sorry if Tony was a bit too OOC this chapter... I know, I get it. I was just kinda grasping at strings

for a while here.

If you got any questions or suggestions lemme know. Thanks again. Love y'all to pieces!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Don't kill me... please.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony was given no time to react. There was no 5-second-delay or grace-period meant to allow him a fair amount of time to fix himself up and look presentable before his face was broadcasted all over live television. Nope. The only warning he had was a simple flicker as the picture of the shadowy man moved to take up half the screen. Next thing he knew, their living room was being broadcasted live for the entire world to see.

A jolt of hot adrenaline flooded his veins when he realized what was happening. His hand flew up to cover Peter's face, mind already fluttering around to try and do some sort of half-assed damage control. The world *cannot* know about Peter or Harley. Kidnapping was a big no-no in every existing rule book there was. People go to prison for things like that he's pretty sure, and having video evidence of said kidnapping even though it wasn't quite what it sounded like... still not a very good look for him. People may know who he is and what he did... but there was never any tangible proof. He had always been so, so careful. He always covered his tracks, slow, methodical, and paved over with a fine-toothed comb.

The guy on screen snickered at Tony's quick impulse. **"Don't think I'm not already aware of who that child is Anthony. Everybody already knows."** Tony found himself growling, jumping up from the couch with Peter's face still concealed. The newspaper was carelessly tossed to the side as Tony stood adjusted Peter and stood abruptly from the couch, holding the kid so his face was hidden against his chest. His hand rested on the back of the kids head, keeping it firmly in place in a hope that there was no real way for the world to officially identify him and that it was all just a big bluff.

"Pepper!" He roared, gesturing wildly in the direction of the kitchen. "Kids! Kitchen now! On the floor behind the cabinets!" It was the only camera angle he could think of that JARVIS' cameras didn't have access too. He thrusts Peter into Harley's arms, adjusting so Harley had him properly concealed and standing in such a way that Tony's back blocked the view to Harley's face even though there had already been plenty of time for him to be identified. Tony cursed colorfully under his breath. He felt his heart rate speed up... because this couldn't possibly be happening. He was always so careful, and this could only end badly. Steve Rogers could only do so much... and in the best case scenario he'd no doubt be forced into hiding, SI would officially shut down for malpractice and illegal dealings... and everything he and his family ever worked for would go down the drain. All just because of a few seconds of hacked footage that had the potential of officially sending him to prison. Not good. It was Al Capone all over again.

"JARVIS!" He hollered as he helped Pepper herd the two boys into the kitchen to hide from the obtrusive camera centered above the TV in the living room. He couldn't believe his state-of-the-art AI system could be compromised like this. He was always so careful especially when it came to the cameras he had placed around the penthouse and Tower for JARVIS. His programming was never anywhere where hackers could access him. Tony had developed a special quantum entangled encryption to prevent occurrences like this. Which meant... someone was inside. Someone had access to JARVIS's main systems directly which were hidden down in the basement. This was double not good squared. Who knew what other functions were compromised.

"Already on it sir," JARVIS immediately replied. But then the gravelly disguised voice of the man on the TV was speaking again and Tony spun on his heel to march back in front of the screen. The camera angle for his living room gave whoever was watching a perfect view of his angry face. There had to be a reason this man felt the need to attack him in his own home like this... oh yes, how could he forget? He was Hydra. Hydra along with an infinite number of other people wanted him dead, in prison, tortured, or brain dead. In fact, Ross already had a specially designed prison just for him. The man claims it's for anybody too dangerous to be kept in a modern prison, but everybody knew the truth. The Raft. How could he forget about the stupid Raft? Alcatraz... Capone. Gosh, so many parallels...

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, Anthony ," the man chuckled, " there's no need to be so brash. Everybody already had their suspicions that you were the one to abduct Mr. Peter Parker and Mr. Keener. In fact, it'd be nice to be officially introduced to the children indulging in your psychotic fantasy of being a father. Though, I can't quite understand your logic considering that Mrs. Pepper Stark is already quite far along into her pregnancy. Oops, was that supposed to be a secret-"

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" Tony snarled, taking a menacing step closer to the screen even though he knew it wouldn't project the wanted effect. He so desperately wanted this man to shudder, submit, shiver... anything, but he knew he wouldn't. He had the upper hand; he was too good... and Tony was afraid to admit it, but... probably better than him.

"Keeping you in your place Anthony. Someone has too before you start getting any ideas. " Tony watches as the shadow of the man's lips pull upwards to reveal shimmering white teeth beneath, light bouncing off from his right canine to accentuate the cunning grin peeking through the shadows. **" And someone has to show the world who you really are. You've deceived people for far too long with your silly morals and good deeds. Maybe that way you might get out of my way and let me do as I please. So world,"** the man's entire body shifts, arms rising dramatically towards the camera. **"Here's the man you claim will save you from the hands of myself. Pitiful, really. You put your trust into a criminal... a man just like me. Though, obviously not quite as good. He doesn't have the tact for this profession as his grandfather and father had. It's ridiculous to think he'd ever be strong-willed enough to go toe-to-toe with me."**

"Listen here you raving piece 'a *shit* !" Tony snapped, teeth bared, muscles tense, and completely on the edge of devolving into a full-on rampage. This man has bared his entire life to the world without any effort. He's undone all the hard work he's accomplished to keep the world out of his business and his personal life private (nobody needed to know about Pepper and the baby. That would only put her and Morgan more at risk... but it was too late now). The entire company will fall into shambles if he doesn't figure out a way to clear his name after this opaque reveal. He is so done with this jackass; he doesn't care who he is. "I don't care who you think you are. I don't care what you are trying to prove, but this is me time. I'm sorry. I'm really not up for consultation and complaints until after 10 am. I have better things to do than to indulge your little evil masterminded fantasies."

"What things must you do, Anthony? Last I heard, your wife and Mr. Rhodes do all the hard work for you. " The man chuckled. " Or are you the new poster boy house husband? Look at that, is that flour on your shirt? And didn't little Peter have on an adorable apron too? Teaching the son of your rival to make breakfast for the family? My God, you *have* gone soft Anthony. That's just too sweet. It's honestly worse than I thought. Your father would be so disappointed in the weakling you've become."

For some reason, that hit a nerve, but he didn't let it show. He knew better than that. "And what do you know about how my father would feel?" Tony frowned, arms crossing over his chest. He refrained from brushing away the white patch of flour on his shirt just to prove he wasn't bothered by the insinuation. People tend to like family-men... it may do him some good on the publicity front. As long as he held onto the public's support there was still a chance for him

"I knew him quite well actually. A good man. One you should be aspiring to be. Not this..." he trails off, arms gesturing vaguely at Tony's form. **" This... domestic pushover. "** The man's voice rises. **" Hell, you've been known to be the most terrifying man in America and Europe! You've done nothing but trick people into trusting you have the ability to fix their corrupt world. You have no spine, no sense of proper justice. You are weak and worthless to the world. People don't need guidance and ridiculous rules to discourage violence. They don't need a choice. Giving ignorant people choices never works in the long run."** The man pauses and sighs dramatically. **"And you could have the world all for yourself with the amount of money you have, and the undying support of the idiots all over the world. You've corrupted some of America's finest already. Captain Steve Rogers of the NYPD is one of your call-boys is he not. The world wouldn't blink an eye if you declared a takeover because they're blinded by this idea you work by. But you're too scared to go for it; a coward who knows he's unworthy of such a large amount of power. I even remember when you were a child; just a wee little thing. You were solid, stoic, a stickler for perfect success just at five years old. You didn't take shit from anybody. You weren't deterred by this false sense of right and wrong. Your father had you molded into the perfect ruler; the perfect successor for his legacy, but then your mother corrupted you with her tales of kindness and morality. "** He ends with a domineering sneer, and Tony doesn't blink. He remains stoic and motionless as he stares blankly at the television screen. He can't let the man get to him. He was only looking for a rise. That's all this

was. He had no proof of Steve's communications with him. The man was just pulling at strings. **"It's sad really. You could have been the perfect partner. You still could be if you would just let go of this silly interpretation of justice you have! Be what your father was Anthony."**

"I'm not my father. I never desire to be like my father. I don't assume things are mine simply because I have the ability to take them. I'm not a heartless bastard like you, my father, or my grandfather, and I'm not afraid to admit that. I will be forever grateful to my mother for saving me from the monster my father was molding me into."

"Don't disrespect your father boy! That'll come back to bite you in the ass one day. He's given you everything you have and will ever have. Your success is thanks to him. Show a bit of appreciation."

Tony subtly adjusts his arms so he can grab ahold of his left wrist. He squeezes tightly and fights to keep his face expressionless. The world was watching. His enemies were watching. He couldn't break down and prove that all these things this man was saying are true. That he's weak. Things were slowly slipping back into his corner and he couldn't lose it just because he let his emotions get the best of him. The man was unknowingly talking him up... or maybe that was on purpose. Tony frowned at the thought... this guy had an ulterior motive. He wasn't trying to get him arrested or killed, there was something else... The man's obviously not dumb enough to say all these things-- things that normal people tend to appreciate in a person-- in an attempt to knock him down on the popularity polls.

"JARVIS!" He shouted before the man could start talking again. He didn't like all this 'not knowing' stuff. "ETA?"

"Practically finished, sir."

Then, the half screen where Tony and the living room were displayed flickered and faded out into grey static. The man laughed, the glimmer of his teeth illuminated through the shadows of his face.

"Well, it looks like your little robot friend finally caught up. Security must not be as great as you claim. Do you really think I came so unprepared? That was just a silly little distraction. Lookie there." Then, just as quickly as the picture faded, another appeared. This time, it was a close up of the Tower. Camera pointed directly at the wall of windows on the 92nd floor, the penthouse floor. Tony raised an eyebrow in contemplation as he stared at the television and watched the defined silhouette of his form standing in the middle of his living room in his pajamas. So, he turned his head and squinted out the window to try and spot the source of the camera.

It was a drone. He rolled his eyes in fed up exasperation. "Of course it's a drone."

Then Tony feels a tingle crawl up his spine. It was a familiar tingle. Like the kind he would get when he was walking down the street. When the hair on the back of his neck would stand on end just before a random guy tried to jump him for cash. And with that, though he dived behind the couch just before glass rained down on the room and the loud sound of bullets whizzed through the air. He heard Peter's distinct scream of surprise at the sudden noise and his panicked cry of "Daddy!", but he ignored it. The only good thing was it seemed the Hydra loon no longer had audio or up-close visual of what was happening in the Tower, which meant JARVIS wasn't completely compromised. There was still hope. Just a little.

Yet, something was still so so very wrong with this picture. Those windows were supposed to be bulletproof. Hell, missile proof even. He'd tested the integrity himself on many occasions.

"What the *hell*?" He growled, peeking over the back of the couch to try and catch a glimpse of what could possibly be breaking through his state of the art protected glass. The drone fired again, this time joined by two more. "JARVIS!" He screamed above the chaos. "Why are they not setting off any alarms? There well within the no-fly-zone! Why aren't the shades dropping? Report goddamnit! Is the Tower under attack?!"

JARVIS's voice comes through with a stutter and a lining of panic. "I-I-I don't know, sir. I am running a diagnostic as we speak, but nothing is being picked up by the radar. I believe my systems have been compromised. I-I can't control or see specific functions of the Tower. Certain cameras are blacking out for extended periods of time and I can't pinpoint a location on the bug that has compromised my operating systems. The signal is bouncing all throughout the Tower sir. I may have to transfer over to FRIDAY's servers. Something doesn't seem right, sir."

"Yeah, no shit," Tony murmurs, preparing himself to make a move for the kitchen once the shooting died down. He needed to get Pepper and the boys out of there and away from any danger as quickly as possible. Who knew what else this guy had up his sleeve.

"Aren't you surprised Anthony?" The man spoke again once the shooting died down. **"You're probably wondering how I got my hands on your designs... And I must give you some credit. Those splintering bullets and radar stealth drones really do come in handy. You have quite the knack for engineering."**

Tony's heart stopped. This guy had his tech... he had his tech. Tech that he'd designed specifically to kill a man with the ease of a skilled sniper. How could this get any worse? He never even

officially fabricated those radar stealth drone, he never made it past the blueprints. He never had the time.

"Though, of course, I made a few modifications of my own. You're not the only genius around these parts Anthony."

God, why does this guy keep calling him that? He doesn't think he's ever wanted to punch someone in the face so badly (except Richard Parker. That one's still in the air at the moment).

The TV screen goes black, but not before the man has a chance to flash another blinding smile. Tony can't stand the fact that he can't see his face. The screen flickers as he waves his goodbye and flashes back to the channel news station. It only takes two more seconds for the surprised news anchor to fall into a loud, panicked spiel about what had just been broadcast across the state. Or possibly the globe considering the weight of this guy's ego. Even if it was just the state, it wouldn't take very long for the footage to reach the rest of the world.

"JARVIS, bring down the shades now," he instructs. "I want the whole Tower on lockdown except the 78th, 72nd, and 67th floors. I want three snipers positioned on each of those floors to take out those drones. Have them use my new EMP nets along with any heavy assault rifles found in the armory. Station eight snipers on the roof and I want at least two guards at every entrance. Release the shadow assault drones and then eject the WhirWhir bugs to circle the tower and drop the electromagnetic radio barrier curtain mirror."

"Is that all, sir?" JARVIS questions as Tony scrambles to his feet.

He vaults across the room as the metal shades slowly begin to drop in place. The gears were fighting against each other, causing a staticky up and down movement as JARVIS' program fought to lower the shades. All he knew is he needed to get to Pepper and the boys. He skids, dropping to his knees as he slides across the wooden floor into the kitchen, hiding behind the barricade of cabinets that Pepper and the boys were pressed against. He can hear the bullets smacking into the thick wood and he takes a second to wonder why he hadn't been hit. He was prepared to be hit... he'd designed those drones to have perfect accuracy.

He curses the Hydra man once more when he realizes his scheme, and he pushes the thought that attempting to kill him was all just for show to the back of his mind. Tony's mouth is downturned into a serious frown, brows furrowed, and eyes fuming with pent up anger. "I want a location on this bastard ASAP. Unscramble the signal used by the drones to see if you can pinpoint a location on the base they are being controlled from. They shouldn't be on an automated flight pattern with those strategic response trails and lack of accuracy. Someone is remotely controlling them from somewhere.. And get Phil Coulson and Sam Wilson up here. No questions. Make sure Happy and

Rhodey rally the troops in case of an attack. It's very possible that someone could already be in the building; make sure no one is operating alone."

"Sir, Mr. Wilson is still recovering."

"I don't care. Tell him to get his ass up here now!"

Pepper stares at him, cradling Peter close to her side. Harley's sits at attention, spine erect and eyes wide as he stares at Tony for some sort of instruction.

"Phil and Wilson? Why on Earth would you bring them up here when this is going on?" Pepper questions with a raise of her brow.

"I need all my experienced guys downstairs on standby just in case, but I need someone capable of protecting you up here to make sure you three stay safe. Coulson might be Hydra, but loves you for some god knows reason, and Wilson hates Hydra. Perfect balance." Tony answers her question with distracted rambling, then he scoots towards the counter to reach for the discarded tablet lying there covered in splintered wood that had flown through the air after one too many bullets had hit the walls and cabinets.

"JARVIS. Pull up the Tower stats. I want a 360 view of what's happenin'. Enable FRIDAY also, you're gonna need all the help you can get. If you can't get your system under control within the next five minutes, I want you to transfer all actions to flow through her server. This guy knows what he's doing."

"Yes, sir." JARVIS answers. Tony studies the tablet intensely, frown prominent as he continues his frustrated flicking through the footage.

"Daddy?" Peter questions warily. Tony looks up at him to see the boy's lip wobbling, head lifted away from where it had been tucked into Pepper's side. His eyes are wide, tearful and scared. Tony doesn't like it.

"What's up Bubba?" Tony smiled warmly, reaching out to take his hand in hopes it would pass along some comfort, despite feeling like a panicked mess himself.

“Wha’s goin’ on?” He asks, leaning forward and lifting his arms for Tony to pull him into his lap. Tony does.

“Nothing you need to be scared about. I’m taking care of it. I won’t let anything bad happen to you, okay?”

Peter nods his head and hides his face in Tony’s shoulder, arms wrapping tightly around his neck. Tony goes back to flipping through the information on the tablet, patting Peter’s back just a couple times. The news anchor continues rambling about the events taking place at the Tower, and Tony can see the new pop-ups of news helicopters hovering at a safe distance from his Tower. God, he was so going to jail after this...

“Alright, it looks like the guys have already taken out one of the drones. Shouldn’t be much longer.” He looks up at Pepper and Harley. “You two okay?”

“Yes Honey, we’re fine.” Pepper smiles. Then, she grimaces and readjusts her weight on the hard floor. “Just a bit uncomfortable.”

Tony frowns then peeks over the counter. He’s happy to see that the shades are practically all the way down. Now would be the best time to move in case JARVIS lost control of them again, or the bullets just so happened to be able to pierce through metal too.

“Let’s move then.” Tony makes move to stand up, but Harley staggers forward to grab his sleeve and pull him back down.

“What about the shooting?”

Tony smiles. “The shades are down, look,” he points to the metal shades covering the windows of the room. The bullets could be heard ricocheting off the thick metal with loud clangs. Harley slowly stands and looks back over his shoulder. The noise is scary and deafening, but safe...

Tony pushes Peter into Harley’s arms and steps over to help Pepper off the floor. He wraps an arm securely around Pepper’s waist, and Pepper wraps an arm around her stomach as Tony leads her and Harley out of the kitchen and into the safe room all the way down the hall.

“You good Honey?” Tony questions worriedly as he helps her settle into the bed inside the room. He tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and cups the side of her face as he rubs his thumb beneath her eyes. “You don’t feel too stressed, do you? ‘Cause I’m gonna fix all this, trust me.”

“I’m fine, Tony,” Pepper says, waving him off and gesturing for Harley and Peter to join her on the bed. “Go take care of what needs to be done. We’ll be fine.”

“Okay...” Tony trails off and takes a step back. “If you’re sure...” He slowly turns to walk out the room because he really does have a crapload of stuff to take care of thanks to the events of the morning, but then he turns back around. “Do you think... since you’re feeling good... that you might be able to work with SI’s PR or the legal team to try and get all this-”

Pepper smiles knowingly at him. “I’ll have it taken care of Tony. Don’t worry. By the end of the day, nobody will question why Peter and Harley are with you. Just try to keep from getting arrested until I get your name cleared, okay?”

“Yes ma’am,” Tony grinned, rushing forward to press a quick kiss to her forehead. He heads for the door again with a little more confidence in his step (because if Pepper says she can do something... she can do it) and makes it out into the hall before Harley intercepts him by running out of the room, out of breath and wild-eyed.

“Tony I can help.”

Tony groans because he really doesn’t have time for the kid’s nonsense at the moment. “I need you to stay-”

“But I can help,” Harley insists once more. “You told me you trust me, and you said you needed all hands on deck. I got this. I can help you more than you think I can.”

“Yes,” Tony reasons slowly, “which is why I am giving you the most important job. I need you to stay up here with Pepper and Peter and keep them calm and safe until Coulson and Wilson show up.”

“What about after they show up?”

Tony refrains from snapping at the boy with a dry retort to stay put and follow his orders.

“Then I need you up here to make sure those two don’t end up killing each other. I don’t trust either of them by themselves. But if Coulson turns out to be Hydra, Wilson will take care of him and if Wilson tries to touch Pepper, Coulson will take care of him. They’re both insane, so I need you here to balance the scales. Got that?”

Harley nods slowly.

“Good. Now stay here. Don’t let Coulson or Wilson convince you into anything JARVIS or Pepper don’t permit you to do. Got that? Don’t tell anybody, but I’m leaving you in charge. Don’t let Pepper overexert herself.”

“Okay, yes sir.” Harley nodded stiffly, shoulders squaring.

“Good. I’ll see you soon kid, hopefully.” Then with that, Tony left to go get some much-needed answers from their latest guest.

“WHO DO YOU WORK FOR?!” Tony screamed. Richard’s head snapped to the side as Tony drove his fist into the side of his jaw. The man’s upper body slumped forward in the chair, pink-tinted saliva hanging from his lip and swinging precariously above his lap where a pool of blood from previous drippings had landed. He coughed and a spittle patterned Tony’s arms and neck because he was still wearing his tank top from the night before instead of his usual long sleeve.

“Stark, I’m not,” he rasped, chapped lips puckering together multiple times as he fought to form proper words. “I’m not- what are you- I don’-don’ understand.”

“WHO DO YOU WORK FOR?!” Tony roared, hand moving to circle around the man’s throat. He squeezes, his own face red by the strain of his own strength. Richard grapples helplessly at his hand, gasping loudly as a stream of blood dribbles down his chin. Tony’s teeth are grit together in a tight grin as he squeezes harder, feeling the man’s neck begin giving way.

“Nghckck,” Richard gasps, scratching at Tony’s hand, leaving ugly red scratches along his forearm. His eyes roll to the back of his head, mouth hung open like a baby bird as blood gurgled in

the back of his throat.

Tony releases him just before he completely passes out, then immediately grabs ahold of a discarded knife he had thrown into the wall earlier and trails the tip down to push into the sensitive space of his windpipe that joined his neck and collarbone. Richard choked harshly. “Speak,” Tony demanded through gritted teeth.

“I-I-I work for-for Oscorp. I told you-” Richard gasped desperately, eyes blown wide in fear.

“LIAR!!” Tony screamed, pressing down harder, forcing a dollop of crimson blood to form around the tip of the knife. He can feel the cartilage trembling through the handle of the thin blade. “WHO ARE YOU WORKING FOR?!”

“Oscorp! Oscorp! I swear. We-we-we sometimes make stuff for Ross when he-he-he needs chemical weapons for foreign affairs and stuff, but-but that’s it I swear it!”

Tony doesn’t know if it’s his obvious loss of control that is scaring Parker into answering his questions or what, but it makes him damn happy to see it. So, he presses further.

“Hydra. You’re working for Hydra.”

“We-we aren’t,” Richard splutters. “They’ve reached out to us a-a couple times, sure, but-but me an Osborn both ‘greed it wouldn’t be good to get caught up with ‘em. Are they... are they-uum... did they say anything?”

Tony raises a brow suspiciously. “Why would they say something? What would they say?”

He can feel Richard’s thick swallow, “they-they’ve been watchin’ us. We-we got lots of stuff they want...

Tony’s brow furrows as he begins piecing things together.

“How long ago did they contact you?”

“Months ago. They-they started makin’ deals with some of our men... we-we still don’t know who all are Hydra. Sorta like what Shield’s goin’ through.”

“How long have you been working for Ross?” Tony lessens the pressure of the blade to allow him to speak clearly.

“Ever since you quit feeding him his toys. I’d say ‘bout f-five or so months maybe?”

Tony hums as he slowly processes. That wasn’t just a coincidence, and it may not be every answer to all his questions, but it's something. There’s still obviously something Richard is holding back, and Tony tries to figure out if that information was worth not killing him right then because after the events of the day... he really really needed a release and he feels that killing Parker would do just that for him...

So, before he can change his mind, he reaches for the man’s hand and presses the blade of his knife into his wrist.

The man writhes against him, attempting to pull away his hand, but only resulting in Tony drawing a long bloody slit along the length of his arm and wrist. Richard screams in horror as he watches the blood pool out from the laceration and begin coating his arm. Tony grins.

His triumph is short-lived though because JARVIS just has to interrupt the moment.

“Sir, your presence has been requested on the penthouse floor.”

He finds himself growling in irritation. It obviously wasn’t an emergency, or else JARVIS would have informed him.

“Is anyone in danger?”

“No, sir.”

Tony sighs.

“Who’s asking?”

“Mr. Allen, sir. He says it's urgent.”

“Then tell him to leave it urgently. I’m kind of busy.” He’s already reaching for Richard’s other wrist when JARVIS speaks again.

“He’s rather insistent sir.”

Tony hangs his head and sighs. He was *so* close...

He didn’t want to just pull a quickie either. He wanted to enjoy this... wanted to take his time with it, but he knew he couldn’t now. Not in the midst of all this chaos going on.

“Godammit,” he grumbled, dropping the knife and looking up to see a rather pale Richard Parker staring back at him. “Shit.” He cursed again. “Tell Banner to get down here. Tell him to fix Parker up; make sure he doesn’t die an’ all that jazz.” He waves his hand dismissively as he exits the small room as he beelines for the elevator, leaving the two guards outside the door to keep an eye on his prisoner.

The tension is still pushing against his restraints and he clenches his hands into tight fists to try and quell the abundance of emotions threatening to burst forth. After this was taken care of he could work on calming down and fixing this whole mess.

“What was so very urgent that I had to be dragged away from my very important business?” He growls immediately after he stepped from the elevator into his destroyed living room.

Everyone was there. Happy, Rhodey, Natasha, Allen, and of course the other five he had expected to be there.

“Why are y’all gathered up here like this is some kinda party?” He asked... just a bit peeved that they weren’t downstairs doing what he asked.

Rhodey steps forward and holds up a placating hand like he was prepared for Tony to lose it at any second. “Tones, man, it’s fine. The threats pretty much contained. Allen actually found the source.” Rhodes gestured to the lanky man across the room where he was fiddling with something in the corner.

“Gotta say I’m surprised Stark.” Wilson chirped, a hand in his pocket and the other hand braced against the cane he was using for recovery. “Don’t think I really wanted to believe you weren’t Hydra. Can’t say much ‘bout it now though, I guess. Kudos to you I s’pose. You won this round.”

Tony rolls his eyes and Sam laughs obnoxiously. Coulson ends up elbowing him in the side to shut him up and Tony likes him just a teeny bit more because of it.

Then, Allen is stepping away from the corner, inspecting something in his open palm before walking towards Tony. He holds out his hand to reveal tiny blocks of wiring. “Your place was bugged, sir. I’ve found 5 up here so far. And I found a few downstairs in the sleeping quarters as well as a couple on the common room floor near Rhodes’ office and the basement. I haven’t checked for your office yet.”

Tony frowned. “Someone’s planted bugs?”

Allen nods. “Lots of ‘em.”

“Well, how the hell did they get up here?! This place is on lockdown all hours of the day. No one gets in or out of here without my say-so.”

Bugs? Bugs?! There were bugs planted in his home and JARVIS didn’t even know! He’s furious. They do a sweep at least every three months. How was this possible? They are *always* so careful.

“I don’t know sir...” Allen trails off timidly. “Is there-is there anyone new that has recently been permitted access to your suite.”

“No,” Tony shakes his head, perplexed, running his hand through his hair. “No there’s nobody.

Pete and Harley are the only ones....” Tony trails off and freezes in place. He’s staring at the ground, hand paused halfway through combing through his hair. Then, slowly, he lifts his head and turns to look at Harley who had Peter in his arms and Pepper’s arm around his shoulders. Harley stared back, looking innocent and just as confused as him. But Tony remembers. He remembers last night when Harley was practically sobbing in his arms, claiming he’d done something horrible enough that Tony would never forgive him. He remembered Harley sitting beside him at his workbench, watching over his shoulder as Tony talked him through some of his more ambitious designs... he remembers how ridiculously quick the kid was able to break down his walls and earn his trust with nothing more than a few innocent smiles, timid bowings of the head, and excitable spiels about whatever it was that had captured his attention that day, and his inborn knack to find trouble just so he could prove his worth. He had been an innocent kid. A good kid, and Tony had been drawn to that, much like he had been drawn to Peter... but maybe trusting him so much so soon was a mistake...

“Harley?” Tony swallows thickly, lips thinning as they press together tightly. “Come over here please.” He sniffs and looks away as he rubbed a hand down his beard. A harsh breath escapes from his mouth as he shuffles on his feet. He doesn’t want to believe it... he doesn’t... but everything-everything is pointing to it being true.

Harley quietly hands Peter over to Rhodey and moves to approach him and Allen. All eyes watch nervously with held breaths. Even Sam and Coulson looked worried for the kid’s sake. When he stops in front of them, Tony nods down at the tiny devices resting in Allen’s open palm.

“Do these look at all familiar to you.”

Harley shakes his head, brows furrowing. “No, not really. Should they?”

Tony hums again and nods his head with a sharp intake of breath.

“Well,” he sighs, “it would make a lotta sense if they did.”

Harley looks at him with a hint of apprehension.

“Tony!” Pepper snaps angrily. “What in the world are you trying to insinuate?!” Pepper sounded absolutely outraged, but Tony holds up a hand to quiet her. It wasn’t the time and she knew it. They didn’t know anything about Harley. It was ridiculous to trust him; to believe he would never do something like this... because he did. He did this and Tony for the life of him can’t understand why he didn’t see it coming. He angles his head down to meet Harley’s eyes.

“You’re pretty new here kid... and I made the mistake of putting faith in you a bit too soon.”

“Tony, what-” the boy begins, but Tony cuts him off with a glare.

“Don’t call me that you little bastard!”

Harley flinched back more violently than Tony has ever seen him do. His eyes are wide in panic and Tony almost feels sorry. “But I-I-I didn’t-”

“Shut it!” Tony snaps venomously, hand gesturing a quick zipping motion. “You’ve manipulated me and taken advantage of my trust. So, I will give you one more chance to fess up. Did you or did you not plant these bugs in here last night?”

Allen butted in with a worried crease in his brow. “Y’know now that you bring it up, Boss... I found lots of these things around the basement stairs and the secluded lounge area the kid hangs around a lot. They-they were the ones that shared the same wall as Mr. Rhodes office.”

Harley’s mouth fell open like a fish, eyes flickering between the two men desperately. “I-I-I didn’t I swear! Allen tell him! I would never do something like this!”

Allen remains abnormally silent. Eyes downcast in pity as he looked down at the kid, and it was easy to see that Harley was getting angry.

“I’m telling you I didn’t do it!” He hollered. “I’ve been set up!”

Tony nods solemnly. “I see. So... Hydra just *happened* to get ahold of my weapons a week after I let you into my workshop where my blueprints are all splayed out for the world to see? The designs and weapons I actually showed you and explained to you because for some reason you were completely fascinated. And this man just happens to know the inner workings of my Tower... like JARVIS and the floor of my penthouse, and the fact that both you and Peter were *here* ? And... hm... I assume you were simply curious about the details of my life and how this place was run. You somehow managed to guilt me into trusting you after you were so *easily* captured by some of the most inexperienced of my men. And by golly, the best coincidence by far!” Tony laughed mockingly. “Hydra knows about Steve Rogers working with me... you seemed so surprised when you first found out kid a few weeks ago kid. Is that why Steve’s been having such a hard time with

Ross? And, speaking of, what about the first time I met you... you were dead set on the fact that Ross was Hydra, something that not even Richard Parker knows yet. A man who has just told me that Hydra's been stealing away some of their men... and guess who used to work for Oscorp... guess who holds the honor of being one of the few to have direct access and communication with JARVIS... and guess who spent the night in my penthouse for the first time last night, claiming that I'd never forgive him for some terrible thing he's done... something I'd kill a man for... only to have Hydra infiltrate all of my AI's systems, which I've personally taught you about, the next morning. Tell me I'm just imagining things, kid."

Harley's eyes are bloodshot, mouth open as he gasps in heavy breaths, but he doesn't respond.

"Is this what was making you feel so guilty last night boy?! You were gettin' kinda nervous about the whole betrayal, being locked up here in the penthouse in the morning, when you knew Hydra was gonna come and take a shot at me?!"

"No!" Harley yelled, shaking his head violently.

"Daddy?" Peter cried out in distress. "What you doin to Ha'ley?" Every neck in the room snapped over to look at Peter, most with wide eyes, but Tony didn't have time to dive into that discussion. He'd rather finish the one he's already started and get it over with. God, he hated this. He hated it so much. Why did things always have to end so badly?

"Not now Peter!" Tony snapped before his head twists to look back down at Harley. Peter's entire body flinched at the harsh tone.

"Don't yell at him you dick!" Harley shouted, stepping forward to shove him backward, but Tony's solid as a rock and the push barely affects him. Instead, he narrows his eyes dangerously at the boy and Harley takes several steps back, but Tony grabbed ahold of his upper arm.

"You're a smart kid," Tony sneers. "I gotta admit it. You had me fooled. I was ready to be a father-figure for you if that's what you wanted; adopt ya even... you had me, kid, I'll admit it, but this is too far. I don't put up with Hydra in my home. Not around my wife or my kid, understand?"

"Tony please, I didn' do any of this. I would never-"

"Tell me what you did then!" Tony screamed. "Tell me what had you so goddamn guilty that you couldn't even admit it to my face! What makes you feel more guilt than betraying the only people

since your mother that have shown you any love?" His tone drops and his eyes narrow. "Pep's gonna be heartbroken. Pete too. Happy and Rhodes even... you were a prick, but they liked ya. They liked you a lot kid. You had a real future here and not just a job. A family too... and you've ruined it. So, you got nothin' else to lose kid, you're goin' through the wringer either way. Might as well spit it out and get it off your chest."

"Tony!" Pepper scolded, tears in her eyes. Then her voice broke into a sob and she reached out as if she were going to grab onto Harley and hug him, but Happy held her back with an outstretched arm. "Don't do this, please. He wouldn't do something like this Tony. Just think. He wouldn't... he wouldn't. Tony please." She lifted a hand to her mouth to stifle a sob and Tony swallowed one of his own. His voice turned raspy and he squeezed his eyes closed to regain focus. He couldn't let his feelings get in the way. The kid had put everyone he cared for in danger. He did it on purpose and that was unacceptable.

"Not now Pepper!" He growled to keep his voice from breaking and he stared at the kid, expecting an answer. Hoping the answer would give Tony reason to believe him. Believe that the kid wouldn't do something like this.

"I-I-I," Harley stuttered, voice quiet and soft. His gaze dropped to his feet and Tony didn't tap his chin to make him look up like he would usually do. No. He never wanted to touch the kid again... not after he did something like this. "I-you said you'd forgive me..."

You could practically hear Tony choke on the sharp intake of air. That was a confession more than anything else.

"That was before I found out you've been lying to me this whole time, kid. I knew there was somethin' wrong with ya. No kid like you should be as *good* as you were. No kid comes out of a life like yours unscathed and determined to do what's right... You had too good a heart... but I guess you needed me to believe that to get on my good side, huh? I can't believe this," Tony growls to cover his whimper, running a hand through his hair. "We were almost due for another bug sweep too. How could you?! The same week I start lettin' you roam around a little bit by yourself you go and do something like this?"

"Tony please, you gotta believe me. I didn't-"

Tony interrupts him. "Do you know what this could mean for me kid?! I can lose everything! I'll be going to prison for this probably. Then there'll be nothin' else stopping Hydra. I can't believe this. You put Pepper and Peter in danger." Tony hears Peter's loud sobs and he turns to see the boy tucked into Rhodey's shoulder. Pepper's glaring at him, face red, accentuated by the large tears rolling down her cheeks.

“This isn’t what I was talkin’ ‘bout last night I swear!” Harley insisted desperately. “I would never do this to you. I-I-I this is... this is the best thing that’s ever happened-”

“I’m sick and tired of your stupid sob story you little shit! I trusted you! I gave you one responsibility! One! To protect the people most important to me!... And you used to be one of them you little brat,” Tony roared. Then his voice dropped to a whisper and he lifted a hand to grab a fistful of the kid’s hair. “They could have been killed and it would have been your fault,” Harley flinched away violently, hands lifting to press into his face as he sobbed loudly.

““Ony stop it! S’op it, Tony, stop! Don’ hurt ‘im p’ease!” Peter wailed loudly. Tony barely registered the abrupt name change and he waves for Rhodey to take him into the next room. He couldn’t-he couldn’t handle this. His-his life was falling apart one layer at a time. Each layer more valuable to him than the last. He’s just... he’s just so angry. He couldn’t believe Harley would do something like this. He couldn’t believe the boy he could have potentially thought of as his own son would betray him like this.

Harley’s arms crossed over his chest, head bowed as tears pooled from his eyes and Tony has to give him credit for sticking to this little cover story for so long.

“I would never...”

“But your guilty ‘bout something aren’t ya?” Tony pressed. “What could you have possibly have done that I don’t already know about? You knew I wouldn’t ever forgive you for doing something like this. You knew. That’s why you didn’t tell me...”

“That’s not it I promise!” Harley screamed, chin tucked close to his chest as his head shook back and forth.

“Then what was it kid, ‘cause I’m gettin’ sick and tired of listenin’ to your sorry excuses. Let’s hear it. Let’s hear the last one. Spit it out.”

Harley looked up at him, tears shining brightly in his eyes and Tony sees something terrifying, gut-wrenching, heart-stopping. Fear, betrayal, broken trust, and guilt... so, *so* much guilt. More than he’s ever seen felt by one human being. The air’s almost knocked out of him with the sudden revelation that he was wrong. He was so, so wrong. Harley would never do something like this and he doesn’t know why he could have ever thought he did. No 14-year-old kid could fake innocence

like this; not even Pepper was able to hold together her persona after he had figured her out...It was just a coincidence. That's all it was and that's all it will ever be... Surely, the kid had been set up.

Tony gulped, eyes softening and glimmering with regret, and he opened his mouth to apologize, praying to anyone that would listen that he might be able to fix this. That there might be some way to make this right again... but Harley beat him to it, and the words that fell from the kid's mouth froze any words that were on the verge of spilling from his own.

He sniffed and rubbed his nose with his sleeve. "I-I killed my Mom." He lifted his head and stared straight at Tony with a sneer. "I told you it was my fault."

And with that, the boy spun on his heel and ran from the room.

Chapter End Notes

If I'm being honest, I don't really like the way this chapter turned out. It might just because I'm not used to writing this kind of angst and drama, but oh well. I hope I'm just being overly critical and it wasn't as cheesy as I felt it was. Anywho... as long as you guys were able to enjoy it I'm happy. Sorry about all the angst... so yeah. Don't hate me lol.

I hope I'll be able to update next Friday like usual, but I don't know for sure. I have a couple term papers to write and my semester classes are starting to finish up, but I was able to pump this one out even despite all the craziness, so who knows.

Thanks for reading.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, sorry for the longer than usual wait... I wanted to get all my other work done so I wouldn't feel as stressed to get this chapter out on time. I wanted it to be good because it's kinda important (not promising it's perfect lol).

Anyways, just a couple minor TRIGGER WARNINGS... lots and lots of self hate. Very minor mention of suicide. And a fairly graphic plot (I guess you could say).

Hope you guys enjoy it...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Sir, I don’t understand. I could have had him locked up by the end of the month. I just needed a couple more weeks, but any chance of that is ruined now.” Ross spoke into the burner phone with a hushed tone, eyes flickering towards the door of his office where his bodyguards were impatiently waiting. They hadn’t left him alone since the interrupted broadcast that morning. They were *thoroughly* convinced that he was in some sort of terrible danger.

“Ross,” the man on the line sighed exasperatedly, but he spoke with a cool serenity, “I told you to keep him out of the way, not to make him disappear. He’s still useful despite the minor character defects.” His voice remained heavy and gravelly as if he were forcing his tone to remain even and unaffected. A voice screaming with years of use and a lifetime of cigars.

Ross didn’t say a word in response. He wasn’t quite brave enough to argue the point further. Instead, his face puckered into a troubled frown, knowing the man wouldn’t be able to see him.

“Keep your hands off that man and stay out of his business, Thaddeus. He has more power than you could ever dream of and if you piss him off, I’m sure he won’t hesitate to put you in your place. He’s on edge; ready to spill over, and once he realizes the power he’s capable of no justice system of yours will be able to stop him. You’re in the place I want you Ross, don’t tamper with it. I put too much work into making you President and if you ruin that then I’m not going to be very happy with you. I know how Anthony works. I’ll be dealing with him here on out. Leave him be or I’ll be sure you’re tried for treason.”

“But sir, Stark is a threat to our progress. Surely you don’t want him to end up interfering--”

“He’s not useful to me in the grave or in prison. All he needs is a change of heart... and that will take some time. I do need a worthy successor after all. Not every man is capable of handling the power of the world. And I won’t be living forever. Anthony is our best chance at maintaining and achieving our goal. Even though he’s been misguided and corrupted with that stupid sense of domesticity,” the man spits the word out with a growl, “he is still a Stark.”

“But sir, you said yourself that Stark isn’t capable of it--”

“In his current condition, he is not. He is too focused on his feelings rather than what needs to be done. Now, that I’ve challenged the safety of those feelings, it should knock some sense into him.” The man chuckled obnoxiously. “I needed to rile Anthony up; give him incentive to prove himself.

It shouldn't take too long. The stress will get to him eventually and he'll be in need of any sense of accomplishment. He'll need something to satiate that large ego of his. Always been spiteful, that one; started even as a child."

"Just like his father." Ross grumbled into the receiver.

"Yes," the man laughed in agreement, "exactly like his father... Alright, that's enough small talk. Do as your told; leave Anthony alone. Keep an eye on him. Also, influence Mr. Osborn to go ahead and gather a rescue party to grab Parker. The man still has some things to finish up for me. Oh, and contact that boy Allen as well. He needs to ensure that Stark makes it to the facility tomorrow. He needs to feel like he has achieved the upper hand."

"Of course, sir," Ross sighed, "and what should be waiting for him there?"

"Ambush him. Make it look real, but no lethal shots. He needs to make it inside alive." There was a long pause and Ross was unsure if the discussion had come to its end. But the man speaks once more. "This time tomorrow night, we'll have taken our first step to fulfilling our legacy."

Harley runs. He doesn't even bother with the elevator, since that just worked *so* well last time, and he bolts for the door hiding the stairs. He can hear the shouts behind him, but the screaming in his head insisting that he run away is far louder. The hot tears trail down his cheeks and he sucks in a sharp breath at the painful, acidic sting they leave in their wake. His eyes burn and he can't catch a breath... His nose is stuffy and now he can't breathe and he just- he just can't breathe! It's like Asher and the guys all over again... but this time Tony isn't going to be there to help calm him down with reassuring words and strong arms to protect him from the world. He doubts Tony wants to be anywhere near him ever again and that small idea has the tears growing hotter.

The panic doesn't stop him though. He continues running towards the staircase, throwing his shoulder against the heavy metal door and began flying down the stairs. He stumbles over his own feet several times, nearly tumbling the rest of the way down the concrete staircase. It could have killed him and he wouldn't have cared... he just told a room full of people the one thing he swore would go to the grave with him after Tony Stark accused him of being a traitor... the man he trusted more than himself believed him to be a traitor. The man that had *promised* he would be forgiving no matter what he had done because he trusted him, and-and... he loved him (even though he never exactly said it). Thinking about the lie the man had led him to believe only made him cry harder.

And the thought made him sick. He stumbled onto the next floor landing with such speed he collided into the wall ahead with a hand braced against it to catch his fall. He bends abruptly at the waist, gasping for air. Then he chokes on his own lung and the next thing he knows he's hunkered over, dry heaving and sobbing with his body pressed into the cold stone of the wall. Terrible retching sounds echo through the stairwell and he can taste bile and thick spit start to coat his tongue.

Tony thought he was a traitor...

Tony hated him...

Tony believed he recklessly put Pepper and Peter in danger. Tony said it would have been his fault if something happened... he would have been the only one to blame if Pepper or Peter had been hurt.

...just like it was his fault that his mother was dead. He killed her. He aimed, pulled the trigger, and

shot her right between the eyes with his sister restrained, thrashing, screaming, and begging for him to *just put the gun down!* ... but he didn't. He didn't listen to her. Instead, he looked his mother straight in the eye as he pressed back against the hard sob blooming in his chest. He never remembered even pulling the trigger. He could only remember the feeling after hearing the deafening bang that resounded through the house and the hard jolt that vibrated through his hand. It was dread. He had screamed. He was sure of it. He couldn't hear it over the ringing in his ears, but his throat was scratched dry by the time the ringing stopped. The sight of the limp form of his mother bent over their dining table with a small stream of blood pouring from the tiny wound between the eyes was forever burned into his dreams. It had been a perfect shot. Then, there was his sister sitting upright beside her, a matching dot of crimson blood settled between her own bloodshot eyes as he mechanically went about cooking and serving the late breakfast he was supposed to lay out in front of their decaying forms. It was a moment he had locked away. A memory his mind had suppressed so vigorously he sometimes forgot where his unrelenting need for companionship stemmed from.

He could have killed his second mother today... It would have been his fault even though it wasn't. He would have been the one to blame... What if he hadn't known he messed up like he hadn't known he messed up the night he was forced to kill his mother? What if this whole time he had been unintentionally feeding information to the enemy? What if he really was to blame? Pepper, Peter, Morgan, and Tony were all in danger... the whole Tower was in danger. The whole organization has been exposed, lying belly up and practically waiting for Hydra to swallow them whole... and it was all his fault. Things were just so messed up.

History tended to repeat itself he supposed.

He heaved again, but this time a small string of bile and saliva spilled from his gasping mouth and he nearly choked on the sour scratch it made against his throat as it rode up. His tears mingled with the sweat coating his face and his body wracked with another violent sob. He sobbed for his mother, his sister, Pepper, Peter, and Tony. He knew he never deserved the second family he had been so close to having; not when he ruined the first one he had. But with them he could forget, and he could finally feel normal and loved and he was drawn to that despite his fervent attempts to remain immune to the kindness. He knew it would never last and he had tried to protect himself from the inevitable letdown, but... at the same time he supposed it's normal for people to become addicted to things that takes away their pain.

Yet, now, with the wounds open, fresh, and screaming, the beginning of an old memory lingers in his mind and he fines a powerful abhorrence gurgling up his throat, through the heavy pool of spit drooling from his mouth.

It wasn't just his fault...

Harley ran to answer the door. He rubbed the flour and sugar from his hands onto his dark jeans, laughing at a joke his mother had poorly delivered just to make his sister laugh. They were baking cookies for his sister's bake sale the next day and their dog Gomer was having the time of his life lapping up all the spilled ingredients.

Another series of harsh knocks banged against the wooden door. Harley rolled his eyes through his laughter. "I'm comin', I'm comin'. Be patient, Geez."

He could hear his sister, Leah, singing in the kitchen and he threw open the door, wearing an innocent, carefree smile. He recognized the uninvited guest instantly and he froze, rooted to the spot in the doorway. His eyes widened and he could physically feel his heart beginning to beat out of his chest. "Uhh, s-s-sir." His greeted stiffly, back straightening so he stood as tall as a 13-year-

old of his stature could. "How um- how can I help you?" He couldn't help but notice the blood staining the cuff of the man's sleeve.

"You messed up Keener." The man scowled angrily.

"I don't- I don't understand sir." Harley stammered.

He had started working for Oscorp when he was 11, after his father stopped sending his mother money and disappeared off the face of the planet. So, he started picking up jobs to help with the bills... his mother didn't know about his "extracurriculars". She was never supposed to know. She'd have a heart attack if she found out he had fallen into the same nasty business his father had. So, to avoid her disappointed frown he'd just sneak cash into her purse or between the couch cushions and hope she wouldn't question it... work was never supposed to follow him home though.

"The G-2 chemical shipment to Martinez didn't go through. He claims he was never informed of the pickup time. It got confiscated at the docks. You have one job-"

"I didn't have anything to do with that shipment!" Harley insisted with narrowed brows. "I was off at Long Island talkin' to Bobby 'bout next month. I've been out there every day this week. Charlie changed my assignment. I haven't **touched** the shipment with Martinez."

"Don't get smart with me, boy." The man didn't even bother to offer another half-assed excuse. instead, he growled in irritation tried to shove Harley out the way so he could step into the cramped home. "I told you you were gonna regret it if you messed up again." He lifted a hand to rub at his face, speaking under his breath. "I swear you're as moronic as your father."

"Leave my family out of this Parker," Harley scowled, moving to stand toe-to-toe with the man, sizing him up despite being at least a foot and a half shorter. "Mrs. Parker made you promise to leave them be, remember? She's friends with my Mom!"

That particular statement seemed to hit a sensitive nerve with the man and he growled, low and threatening in the back of his throat.

"Mary's outta the picture. Stark killed her." Harley couldn't help but catch onto the poorly put together lie nearly instantly. He eyed the blood stained on the man's cuffs then the angry scowl on his face and he gulped so hard it hurt. This wouldn't be ending very well. Richard Parker was pissed... and something in the back of his mind was telling him it wasn't just about the failed shipment. Heck, the man was rarely involved with anything beyond experimenting with chemicals in his lab. Nope. This was most definitely personal.

"You should have done your job **Keener**." He spat out the word in disgust, but Harley kept a neutral face and refused to flinch. He didn't want to give the man that satisfaction. Parker didn't seem to like that very much, so he raised his hand and roared. "Get out of the way boy!"

Harley was nearly thrown to the ground by the force of the blow, and soon after he scrambled back to his feet, he heard a pair of hurried footsteps rushing into the room. "Harley? Honey? Who was at the door?"

It was his mom. A worried frown was etched onto her face as she used a cloth to wipe stray batter from her cheek.

"It's nobody Ma-" Harley rushed out, heart palpitating inside his chest in panic. He was ready to jump into action at any moment. Anything he needed to do. If that meant throwing himself at a man

twice his size to give his mother and sister time to escape, he'd do it. It was **his** job to protect them now after all.

"Ms. Keener," Richard interrupted with a sickly-sweet smile. Harley's entire body stuttered with a surprised jolt. Parker ignored him and reached for his mother's hand. Her eyes narrowed warily, but she held out her hand for him and he kissed the back of it.

"I was just telling your son about something. Y'know, he's much like his father." He paused and looked at her, eyes glinting with amusement. "I'm surprised you don't remember me."

His mother's brows furrowed together contemplatively as she studied the man's face as if sear hung for any familiarity. "You-you... Richard? Richard Parker?" Her face split into a happy smile and Harley could only stare. "It's so good to see you! I almost didn't recognize you with the new beard. How are you? How's Mary?"

"Mary's doing just fine," Richard lied easily. Harley shuddered... he needed to get them out of here. Now.

"That's good to hear." Harley's mother smiled. "Would you like something to eat? A cookie maybe? The first batch just came from the oven... I can't promise they will be any good though."

Richard laughed, casting a smirk towards Harley who stood to the side of the door with wide eyes and a gaping mouth. "That would be lovely. I s'pose I could stick around for a while."

Harley snapped back to reality when he heard a loud bang from above and two familiar voices calling for him. Happy and Allen... he didn't want to talk to either of them right now. For all he knew, they were going to drag him back up to Tony so the man could have his way with him. He didn't think he could handle that... not when Tony had been so kind and loving... he'd never be able to trust anyone again. He didn't want to give the man the opportunity to break any more of his promises.

"Harley! Kid!" They shouted for him and Harley pushed against the wall he was leaning against and threw himself down the next set of stairs. His legs felt like jelly beneath him, but... he just needed to get away... he couldn't face Tony.

Tony stare was blank as he watched the door leading to the stairs slam closed behind the kid.

Then, all at once, commotion broke out around him. It was loud and suffocating; every noise that he hated was sounding all at once. Pepper was screaming at him through her wet tears, Peter could still be heard wailing from the other room, and both Allen and Happy were questioning him for instruction on their next course of action. But all that noise was drowned out, fading into an annoying hum in the back of his mind. It couldn't be heard over the ringing, the echoing bang of the door and the violent screaming in his head... because he had messed up. He'd messed up bad and there was a good chance that it could never be fixed.

It was all just a jumbled mix of noise, anxiety, and chaos... and it was- it was making him panic. His head couldn't make sense of it, but his body seemed to be able to. He felt his chest seizing and his left wrist burned. There was so much activity going on, so much of his life that was being torn apart layer by layer and he just- he couldn't handle this for very much longer. He couldn't-- he didn't think he could keep control of himself much longer. The screaming was getting too loud, and his resolve was wearing thin. He always hears the voices in his head, telling him what to do-- it's nothing new... and he can't help but listen to them every. Single. Damn. Time. This was different... he couldn't run away. Not this time. Because if he ran there would be nothing left for

him if he ever decided to come back.

Pepper's voice was the first to filter in through the thick cloud of angst in his mind. He feels dizzy and nauseous and for a split second he can't place who he was or why he's there. Then, Pepper shouts, loud and shrill and it sends a jolt to his brain. He could feel the slight glaze in his eyes clear away as he turned his head to look at her, red in the face with tears trailing rapidly down her shining cheeks. Natasha and Coulson both helped her to the couch and Tony watched silently as she continued screaming obscenities at him... he didn't blame her. The voices in his head are doing the same.

He couldn't be absolutely certain what his face looked like, but he was sure he appeared to be at least a bit drained and put-off. He rubbed discreetly at his eyes, clearing away the slight moisture. Happy and Allen's panicked questions were still caught in the mist of dazed confusion as if he were in a state of shock. He kneaded his palms with the tips of his nails to test if he were there; alive and breathing... that all this had actually just happened... he felt the tight pinch and he grit his teeth. A strangled growl was pushed from his mouth and he hung his head. It hurt. There was just *too much* going on.

"Rhodes," he breathed out heavily, head bent to stare at the ground and eyes dark. "Where's Rhodes?"

"In the room with the kid."

Tony could just barely make out Peter's cries from the next room over Pepper's angry shouts.

Maybe he made some sort of vague hand gesture, or maybe Happy was that great at reading his mind. He didn't know. All he knew was one moment he was struggling to stand on his own two feet and the next his best friend was there with a tight grip on both his arms, holding him up like he'd been doing all these years.

His head snaps up to stare at Rhodey and his hands lift to grip the man's biceps in return, a manic look in his eyes as he chokes on his own tongue. He barely turns his head in search of Peter to find the child cuddled against Pepper as his wife rocked them both back and forth while sitting on the couch. He turns back to Rhodey and swallows hard, mouth opening to force words out... but... but something was caught in his throat and he couldn't breathe.

"Rhodey..." he gasped, knees nearly buckling beneath him. Rhodey's brows furrow together and he rights him, lifting a hand to cup the side of his neck reassuringly so they'd be looking eye to eye. Tony could feel the eyes staring. He could feel them burning into his body from every angle. It was degrading and shameful, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. Everything was going wrong and it was nothing in comparison. He could only hope Sam, Coulson, and Natasha wouldn't find a way to use his weakness against him now that they've witnessed firsthand the state it leaves him.

That's why no man in his position should love anything. Why nothing should love him in return. Why he shouldn't trust, and laugh, and *feel*. This was why he didn't deserve goodness. He never deserved it, even as a child. The monsters were everywhere, eating him alive from the inside out until the evil was all that was left in its wake. He didn't deserve happiness because all he would ever do was take it away from people that did.

"I know this is tough Tones... but you need to look at me..." Tony does, eyes red and blown wide as he slowly comes down from his high state of shock. Too much; too fast. It was just getting to be *too much*.

This just isn't right. This shouldn't be happening... it shouldn't be affecting him like it was. He was Anthony Stark! A Stark! And he was freaking out... over what?! The fact that he'd potentially lost the practically nonexistent bond he'd formed with a random runt off the streets? He was fine... he should be fine. He's *fine*.

"Talk to me Tones." Rhodey instructs firmly, hand guiding Tony's jaw to look at him when his eyes wandered... maybe this was more than shock. Maybe his body was more than just going into shock... because now he couldn't remember. He couldn't process and for some reason he can't feel. "Tell me if I need to send someone to catch that kid before he does something worse. Just nod "yes" or "no"."

Tony mind draws an ugly blank. Not the peaceful ignorance he's wished for on many occasions. No... this is that relentless pressure you get in your chest after the strain of carrying a heavy weight. It was the fight to form words... any words... literally anything to explain that this was all just so messed up and for some reason he couldn't remember it despite the ugly flashes of memories flooding his thoughts with scary accuracy. He couldn't do it. He couldn't remember and even though he wanted to scream he couldn't because his father had his hand wrapped around his throat... glaring at him and screaming at him for freezing, for thinking he could handle a life like this and still be normal. It was where all he could see was Harley and Peter and Pepper... and his father. It was the worst kind of blank.

"Tones," Rhodey's voice took on a tender tone. He stared at Tony, hand shifting from its demanding grip to a comforting support, thumb swiping in front of his ear. "I know this has gotta be hard for you. You've gone through a lot these past months... but you need to tell me if Harley's the reason behind this. He knows too much and we can't risk him getting out the Tower.

Tony stares and he sucks in a quick breath.

"Don't let him leave."

Those were the only words he could force out. He couldn't explain that this was all just a big misunderstanding. He just couldn't let him go. Not with at least saying goodbye.

So, he watched as both Happy and Allen ran for the door Harley bolted out of. He glanced over at the other 3 lingering in an uncanny silence. Romanoff and Coulson turned away, backs erect and face expressionless... but Sam stared. Stared straight into his soul with a calculating eye and a pitying frown. At that, Tony's breath returned, and he could hear his heart beating and Peter's quiet sniffing. So, he breathed deep then scowled, nostrils flaring wildly and eyes darkening to salvage any dignity he may have had left. Then he turned away from Sam, left Rhodey to deal with the rest of the chaos going on in his living room and he headed for the elevator.

He *really* needed a drink...

Later that evening, after Pepper and Rhodey shooed away Coulson, Sam, and Romanoff, Rhodey helped her and Peter into bed. Both were obviously exhausted. Their eyes were bloodshot, and Peter hadn't spoken a word since a few minutes after Tony left. Those words being spoken in a quivering whisper. ("*Why would Tony do dat?*")

Rhodey stuck around for a while, making sure the attack was still officially neutralized and that both Pepper and Peter would be okay. He left after the first movie, kissing Pepper on the cheek and ruffling Peter's hair affectionately. Peter seemed surprised by the sudden display of affection on the man's part and Rhodey only smiled down at him. Despite his constant complaining, he did have a bit of a soft spot for the boy.

"I'm sorry this happened Pep..." he trailed off quietly, eyes downcast as he released a heavy sigh. "I-I-I'm not sure how it'll all turn out in the end, but... Maybe I can talk to Tony..."

Pepper cups his cheek with the arm not wrapped around Peter, and she smiles up at him. "It's okay Jimmy. This isn't your fault." Tears leak from her eyes and she quickly swipes them away, and then her shaky smile angles down into a serious frown. "But you tell Anthony that he better not lay a hand on that little boy's head or he'll be seeing divorce papers on his desk in the morning. If he wants him gone, I'll take him and Peter and leave for good."

Rhodey jerks suddenly. "Pep... please... think about this. Tony's as heartbroken about this as you are. You shoulda seen him: he could barely breathe. He loves Harley too and this is hitting him hard." Pepper doesn't dignify him with a response. She just continues mindlessly combing through Peter's hair. More tears fall and she bites her lip... the thought that the man she loves would hurt their child. It makes her sick. "P-Pep c'mon. He's only trying to keep you and Pete safe. If Harley's really working for Hydra... he's dangerous. He's been lying to you this whole time-"

"NO HE NOT!!!" Peter screams, sitting up with a sudden jerk. He slams his fists on the fluffy comforter of the bed. "Ha'ley good!" He insists through a stuttered intake of breath. His entire body heaves as he struggles to catch a breath through his fit of rage.

"Okay, okay," Rhodey placated gently. "It's okay Pete..."

Peter stares at him through teary eyes and he falls against Pepper to press his cheek into her chest, but he doesn't tear his eyes away from Rhodey.

"He my brot'er, Rhodey. He's good."

Rhodey sighed and chuckled humorlessly under his breath. "Yeah, I know buddy. Why don't you get some rest...?"

Pepper nods shakily, pulling Peter closer. She dismisses Rhodey with a wave of her hand and she cradles the little boy carefully in her arms, pressing her face into his soft, curly hair. She cries. She kisses his head and cries. It's something she hates.

She never used to cry.

Never.

But then Tony Stark had to go and knock her up-- stupid hormones--... and then these kids showed up and made her start *caring*. If this is what caring felt like, she most definitely hated it. She remembered when she'd been heartless enough to leave behind any child of an old mark. She didn't used to care... but ever since that small taste of loss she received... She could never deny a child. Never. Especially not one she'd already dreamed of calling her own.

"Is Tony gonna f'give Ha'ley? He didn' do nothin' wrong Mama." Peter muttered into her shirt; tiny hand curled tighter into the hem of the soft fabric.

"I don't know baby." Pepper sighs heavily. "Tony..." for some reason saying the name felt wrong on her tongue... She gulped. "Tony thinks Harley did something very bad. Y'know sometimes when kids do bad things, grownups get mad because they love them and know they can do better."

Peter snuffles and sits up to look Pepper in the eyes. "So-so Tony still loves Ha'ley? Tony still Ha'ley's Daddy? He's not gonna hurt 'im?"

Peppers mouth opens, ready to answer... but she's not sure. She can't be for certain. She wants to

believe Tony's accusations were simply heat of the moment; simply a result of an overabundance of stress and activity. But... despite her firm conviction that Harley could never do what Tony accuses him of, there is still a lingering doubt in the back of her head telling her it makes sense. She can't help but wonder if Tony's right... if one of the boys they had adopted into their life had betrayed them so horrifically. She decided not to dwell on it... Harley would never be capable of something so evil. She was sure of it. Then again, turning a blind eye out of attachment and admiration was when people in their line of work tended to get screwed. Still... Harley wouldn't do that.

However... what Tony believed is a different matter. He may care for Harley. He may be heartbroken that the boy turned against him, but that wouldn't stop him. Tony was a man of logic and action. He would never sacrifice the protection of something he loved more to have something he loved less.

"I-I-I don't know baby... He still loves you though. That will never change. He can still be your Daddy if you want."

Peter's lip quivers violently and he shakes his head emphatically, but he doesn't say a word.

"It's okay baby." Pepper whispers into his hair, hugging him tighter to her body. Her heart drops, but she's not sure why because she's mad at Tony too... "It's okay. It'll be okay, I promise."

She so desperately wants to slap Anthony Stark in the face.

Later that night, after Pepper tucks an already sleeping Peter into his toddler bed, she makes her way into the Living room, settles on the couch, and waits. She's calm. She plans for a peaceful conversation because that's the best way to get her point across with her defensive husband.

It isn't even an hour later until Tony's stumbling out of the elevator, reeking of alcohol and eyes bloodshot. She finds herself growing angry.

"Tony?" She questions, eyes narrowing as she pushes herself off the couch. "Are you *drunk*?"

Tony's head bounces before turning to look towards her with a dull glare. He looks like he's halfway down the trek to hell. "Wassit to you?" He slurs.

Pepper bristles, nostrils flaring angrily. "You know... I was going to try and have a reasonable conversation, but that's obviously not going to happen with you like this." She turns on her heel and starts for her room. "Don't bother coming to bed. I'd rather not look at you for another second."

"Hey!" Tony roars loudly. She hears his stumbling footsteps behind her and she braces herself. "Don't you walk away from me!"

Pepper whirls around and glares at him, hands fisted at her side. "Well, what do you want me to do then Anthony?!"

"Don't call me that!" He shouts, lifting a shaky hand to point his finger at her.

"I can damn well call you whatever the hell I want!" Pepper shouts right back. "You've messed up too much to reserve the right to argue with me right now."

"I screwed up! I get it! But ya can't blame me!" Tony stumbles closer to her, voicing the argument he'd been repeating like a mantra in his head. Just something to keep himself from firing a bullet into his mouth. Pepper didn't know that though. She could just smell the alcohol on her breath, the hot air stinging her eyes, and the manic look in the man's eyes.

"Yes, I can!" Pepper shouts. "You threatened a child! A child that trusts you and loves you, and you went and accused him of trying to kill us! How can I not blame you for that Tony?! He was our child. He was going to be *our* child!" Her voice rose an octave. "I even had the paperwork from legal and PR to cover the kidnapping accusation! Just one more week and he would have been our son--"

"I 's tryin' ta protect you!!!" Tony's entire face drains of color and he shouts at the top of his lungs. "He-he-he I can't just--"

"Why would you even *think* he's capable of something like that?"

"I don't know!" Tony's hands fly up to cradle his head and a strangled groan escapes him. "I don't know!" His voice echoes, scratching madly at his throat as he forces the words through his own rampaging thoughts. "I don't know I don't know I don't know! I messed up! Everything was just-- it was just! I couldn' handle it! Every-everythin' was jus-jus' wrong an-an' I got mad! I got mad at me for lettin' him anywhere near you!! I hated that I coulda got blindsided by a stupid kid--"

"You didn't!" Pepper screams. "He isn't responsible for this! Didn't you hear him?! Nobody can lie that well, Tony! He was heartbroken!"

"You don't think I know that!!" Tony's voice raised in volume and Pepper flinched back. "You don't think I know I just ruind everythin'. I've ruind everythin'! I'll never be able to fix it an-an' I just!" He groans loudly and turns to throw his fist into the wall. The dry wall breaks, and his fist goes through, dust and stone falling around his hand as he screams out in his anger. "It's my fault!! I know!!! I messed up you don't gotta shove it in my face!!" He turns to look at Pepper, tears streaking down his face and he breathes in her expression. She's scared... she's scared of him. Peter's scared of him. Harley's scared of him... everyone is scared of him... and they damn well should be...

She wasn't used to him acting out as a raging drunk. She had only experienced it once, and after what Tony had done... he swore to never drink himself to that point again... yet, here he was...

He took a step forward, eyes furrowing together in worry. He didn't want her to be afraid. He couldn't handle her being afraid. He just couldn't... She takes a step away.

"Tony, don't--" she warns with a shaky voice. She holds out a hand to stop him and Tony ignores her. He takes another step. He couldn't let her be afraid. "Tony no! Don't make me call Rhodey up here. You're drunk... don't--just don't."

He doesn't know why he doesn't listen. Maybe it's the liquor, or maybe it's the unexplainable need to just hold her in his arms and apologize over and over so she would just forgive him and love him and hold him while he cried. He needed someone to forgive him... because he will never forgive himself.

But that one more step was a mistake. A mistake that led to his heart being broken in more ways than one.

"Noooooooo!!!" There was a loud high-pitched screech followed by Peter darting from the hall with bright red cheeks and angry tears shimmering in the poor lighting of the ruined room. Tony startles, jerking back as he watches Peter quite literally attack him.

He kicks and punches at his leg. He scratches, fisting his hands in Tony's jeans and pulling to try and trip him. "Nooo!" He screams, continuing to strike him, angling his head to bite Tony's thigh with his sharp teeth. Tony scrambles back as Peter's tinted teeth dig into his flesh and Peter goes in

again, attacking relentlessly with the intention of drawing as much blood as possible.

"Stay away from my Mama!!" The boy screeches, stomping his foot onto Tony's socked feet. He pinches his leg with a strong fist and Tony tries jerking away again but he stumbles and falls back on his ass. Peter doesn't hesitate. He scrambles and moves to Tony's face, quite literally drawing blood from his violent scratches. Tony tries swatting him away with careful hands, but he refrains from too much; terrified that he might end up hurting the child in some way. So, he settles on blocking his face to protect it from the boy's relentless beating. How could he blame the boy?

"Don't you touch 'er!! I won't let you hurt her!"

"Petey, I'm not--" Tony tries arguing, sobering up quicker than he ever had in the past to try and explain. He hated that Peter... he hated not being his dad. He hated that the boy hated him.

"Noo!!" Peter screeched again, slapping Tony *hard*. The intent hurt more than anything else...

Thankfully, Pepper steps in before Peter can push Tony even further over the edge. Before his instincts take over and he ends up lashing out to defend himself in his growing panic.

"Peter baby, stop it." She wraps her arms around the boy's waist, dragging him off Tony. He continues screaming, staring right at Tony as he does so. He doesn't break eye contact; pupils blown wide and the white around his eyes accentuated by bright red veins circling it, and Tony gulps. He's never felt so threatened in his life.

"Maybe it's best you sleep downstairs Tony." Pepper says softly, casting him a pitying look as she lifts Peter into her arms.

Tony stays on the floor, watching her leave. He lifts his hand slowly to rest on the stinging skin where Peter had struck him, and he watches. Peter's stare doesn't break, he watches him carefully over Pepper's shoulder and his face down turns into a hateful scowl.

He barely hears it. Heck, he probably didn't hear it at all, but the words were clear as day with the emphasized movements of his lips, seeing the exact movement of lips more times than he could count. Tony chokes on his tears, heart dropping into his stomach.

"*I hate you.*"

He's never hated himself as much as he did in that moment. He'd gone and done it. He did the very thing he promised he'd never do, and that could never be forgiven.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry in advance to all of you who are feeling absolutely gutted after this... sorry. I can't promise it's all gonna be rainbows and unicorns next chapter cuz there's still quite a bit more to cover, but all will end well, I promise... Anyways, let me know what you thought! Call me out if I'm making things too unrealistic or if I'm inconsistent with characterization and plot, or if I'm pushing the dark side a bit too much... I'm kinda OCD and it drives me nuts sometimes thinking I might have inconsistencies or something. It doesn't hurt my feelings, honest! I love hearing your opinions, makes me try and better myself at writing and gives me some inspiration to get writing.

Also, I'm changing the rating to mature... I feel that some things are getting kinda dark y'know, and I don't want to mislead anyone. So yeah... you probably noticed that at the start and if you didn't you probably don't care, but I just thought I'd address it lol.

So, thanks for reading you guys. I love you dearly!! MWAH!!

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Self-harm, attempted suicide.

It's kinda depressing, but not as bad as the past couple.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony feels a familiar grogginess overtake his body as he tosses his head back and swallows the last bit of burning alcohol lingering at the bottom of the expensive bottle. He smacks his lips and they upturn at a lazy pace to show off a wide, teeth-baring, grin. He feels a numbness settle over him and the fog in his mind thickens. It's a wonderful feeling of nothingness; drowning out old thoughts and subduing the constant badgering and screaming taking place inside his head. His eyes drooped and he sighed in contentment, relishing in the feeling that he might actually be able to sleep. But then he remembers something...

Pepper.

Apparently, out of all the things his brain struggled to piece together, the one thing he'd been fighting to forget was still dangling mockingly in front of his face. He could hear her laughing; see her smile; smell her hair. She was beautiful and the feeling of her warm body pressed close to his terrified him because he had never craved for human touch as much as he did for it from that woman. But then he could hear her yelling; see her frown... he remembered the terrible fallout after Tony had taken things a step too far.

He hadn't known though... he didn't-- he wasn't used to that kind of thing: having a healthy, romantic, loving relationship with a woman. It was beyond his understanding and he had messed up. Probably too badly to ever be forgiven.

*He hissed in frustration and he barely had time to react before his body was responding to the anger. His hand tightens around the neck of the bottle and the glass splinters in his grip. He growls then swept his arm clumsily across his desk to send the now ruined glass bottle to the ground. The rest shattered on impact, raining the hardwood floor with tiny pieces of stained glass. The crash echoes in his ears and for some reason it sounds so similar to Pepper's last words to him that have been thrumming recurrently in his head (**"You're a selfish bastard. Stay the hell away from me"**). Then, the nothingness haze is fading, and his mind is back at work. He blinks slowly and shakes his head to clear the odd jumble of thoughts that are making appearances at the forefront of his mind yet make no discernible sense to him. Then he growled and lifted his hand to examine it. He squints and cocks his head as he tries to process the little bit of blood trickling from his palm.*

It doesn't hurt... or at least he doesn't think it does.

It doesn't hurt nearly as much as Pepper's rejection, however much he deserved it.

The returning thought of Pepper works him up again and he stumbles to his feet, ignoring the sound of glass crushing beneath his heavy shoes. He just-- he needs to find her. He needs to talk to her and apologize. It'll make him look like a clingy bastard, but he didn't give a shit. He was so

enthralled with the feeling he had when he was with Pepper and he didn't want to lose it just because of his ignorance. He can hardly recall the details. The thoughts and images were all blurry, so he let the feeling in his gut guide him. He rarely felt guilt, so that had to mean it was something serious, right?

*His gaze scans across the room to get a handle on himself... he had drank **a lot**. Pepper wouldn't be so pleased with him. Though, he's at least coherent enough to grab his father's revolver (or maybe that's just habit) and he trips his way to the door. For some reason he has a feeling he might need to use it.*

Not on Pepper...

Never on Pepper.

Fury from Shield had been hounding him lately, which meant Phil Coulson was a frequent visitor to his Tower. And sadly, the man had seemed to have taken quite a liking for Pepper and the thought made him grimace. If he wasn't coherent enough to land a solid punch, then at least he'd be able to shoot him. The man enraged him to no end; constantly ignoring his orders with a claim that he didn't work for him. It just pissed Tony off, and it didn't help that Pepper seemed genuinely entertained when speaking with him. He can't get a handle on the thoughts; and for potentially the first time he wished he weren't drunk.

He makes it out his office with little problem, then continues down the halls to get to the elevator. He could feel the eyes watching him and usually he would care because Obie would yell at him for showing off a vulnerable side to his soldiers, but he was on a mission and nothing was about to distract him from it. Not even the threat of both Obie and Rhodey ganging up on him for being irresponsible.

It was honestly kinda funny how everyone veered out of his path though. He's sure if he wasn't so distracted by the craziness brewing and mixing with copious amounts of alcohol, he would have laughed at the butched men scampering away from him. He was known to be a raging drunk; it wasn't a secret. He was like his father in more ways than one and he wasn't all that afraid to admit it. His father, despite some of the terrible things he'd done to him as a young boy, was a respectable man and he knew how to run game. A good game. And ever since Tony was a child, he aspired to live up to his father's abilities; make him proud for once.

"Pepper," Tony croaks, falling against the elevator wall. The walk across the floor seemed to tire his body out and his legs nearly collapsed beneath him. The haziness and numbness in his limbs were definitely making a reappearance. The doors close and Tony rubs his forehead. He can't seem to grasp on any string of self-control. It was such an odd feeling, yet so liberating. It was a freedom to do as he pleased without worry of regret or guilt... until the next night after the hangover passed.

"You would like me to take you to Ms. Potts, sir?" JARVIS questions once the elevator kicks into movement. Tony panics for a brief moment, head snapping every which way to figure out why in the world the ground was moving, but he figured it out... he was just flying. Nothing new.

"Yeah," he slurred, pushing down on a heavy burp. It hurt his chest, but he rubbed his eyes and waited for the pressure to leave.

"Sir, may I suggest rethinking that decision. You are heavily intoxicated, and you have recently experienced a negative exchange with Ms. Potts. This may not be a wise course of action. You will regret doing any lasting harm to her in the future."

“Shat’p,” Tony slurs, trying his best to glare at wherever the camera was... he just couldn’t remember where it was. So, he settled for glaring at the doors. “Not g’anna hurt her. Just need ta talk.” He nodded his head solemnly, and his next action may have been controversial to his words, but he swears it wasn’t. He fumbled a bit, but he eventually pressed down on the hammer of his revolver with a telltale click. He stretched his jaw and shook his head once more... he just needed to talk to Pepper. About what? He wasn’t so sure anymore, but he just needed to talk...

The doors opened for him and he stepped out, tossing his head around to examine the mostly empty floor JARVIS had led him to.

“Pepper?!” He shouted. His voice sounding rough and gravelly, but he didn’t care.

He heard some panicked shuffling somewhere down the hall and his mind seemed to work faster than his feet and he caught himself right before he face planted into the floor. He straightened back up and headed for the noise in hopes of finding Pepper.

Well, he found her alright, but she wasn’t alone and for some reason he didn’t reel surprised at the discovery.

He paused at the end of the hall and stared. His eyebrows furrowed together, and he found himself growing angry, or at least something akin to anger. It was an odd feeling.

“Wha’d I tell ya ‘bout bein’ ‘round my girl Coulson?” He slurred angrily, marching towards the shorter man without a single sway or shuffle to his step. His mind was abnormally clear, and the numbness faded into a light pulsing in his limbs. He pinpoints several specific memories of Coulson negotiating Pepper’s release... the man wanted to take Pepper away from him.

*Pepper stood from her chair, looking infuriated as she held her glass of wine delicately in her hand. “I am not **your** girl Tony Stark! We have been over this you entitled bastard. You don’t own me. We had sex twice, that is it. Get over yourself. I can speak to whoever I want.”*

Tony grabbed her. He didn’t register her surprised yelp as he tugged her closer, further away from this stupid, stupid man he had grown to detest. He knew Pepper wasn’t attracted to him... she’d told him so. She was... she had just been Pepper; a woman obsessed with her work, searching for a next mark. That didn’t make the boiling pool in his stomach settle though.

“Stark,” Coulson began, standing from his seat opposite the one Pepper had been sitting with an empty glass in his hand. “Pepper’s made it quite clear she’s not interested-”

“Shut’p!” Tony screamed, lifting his revolver to point it squarely at the man’s chest. He was always a perfect shot... even when he was drunk.

“Let go of me,” Pepper struggled against his hold and Tony only found himself growing sad at the thought that she was so desperate to get away from him. What if she really did decide to go work for Coulson and Fury instead of him? They’ve been trying to poach her ever since Coulson’s first serious altercation with him... he just-- he didn’t think he could handle having Pepper taken away from him.

“Pepper,” he responded sadly, glancing down at her with a sad, vulnerable frown and wide eyes. “M sorry ‘bout what I did. I’ll do better.”

Pepper’s only response was a glare.

“You need to stop acting like a little boy Anthony. Not everything in the world belongs to you. I told you “no”, so stop acting like a possessive, clingy, control freak.” Tony’s hold on her loosens at her

harsh words and he feels hurt fester in his chest. He knew why she denied him; she had told him straight to his face. She was never one to hold things back. She said it how she saw it and that's one of the things he loved about her.

God, he just wanted to kiss her so bad.

"Just needed to keep you safe," Tony argued fruitlessly, staring at her with pleading eyes. He hopes maybe she'd reconsider because he loves her for some reason and he'd never loved someone before, and he doubts he'd ever love anyone else. But perhaps that was part of her ploy. If it was, she was damn sure good at her job.

"She needed to be kept safe from you," Coulson spoke up, stepping towards the pair with his hand outstretched towards Pepper.

Tony stares at him, blank eyes devoid of any emotion, colored over with the drunken haze still present in his consciousness. His body screams with an instinctive drive to **Protect! Protect! Protect!** "You're toin' a real thin line there Coulson. Keep ya hands off 'er." He won't let Coulson take her away from him. Not now; not ever. She wouldn't be safe with them...

Coulson ignores the warning and steps closer, grabbing ahold of Pepper's elbow gently. "Fury's willing to pay you whatever she owes. I'll take her off your hands-"

Coulson wasn't even able to finish his sentence before three loud shots rang out and he dropped like a limp rag doll. Tony watched him fall with only a curious tilt of his head, elbow tucked into his side with his revolver pointed directly where the man once stood. He can vaguely hear Pepper's frantic screams over the familiar ring resonating after the loud fire. She tears away from him and drops next to Coulson, three red blotches already forming on his chest.

Tony blinks away the haziness and hiccups slightly, looking down at the gun in his hand with a squint. The screaming is gone; threat neutralized. She was safe... Then, he clears his throat and hauls Pepper to her feet by her arm.

"JARVIS. Get Obie to send someone up to clean this mess."

Pepper's screaming at him, but he doesn't really care. She may not understand then, but it was necessary. At least, that's what his drunken mind told him.

Tony presses his fingers against the side of his skull, slowly massaging his temple in hopes it would alleviate the painful pressure behind his eyes. He remembers that day... wasn't one of his most shining moments he'd admit.

He groans slowly, eyes closing as he patiently waits for the painkillers to kick in and get rid of this damn hangover. He remembers he used to love getting drunk; the feeling of nothing at all was so alleviating that he had become addicted to it. So, after that particular day, when he had promised Pepper to never drink himself to that point around her again, he was so convinced he'd miss it terribly. He was wrong... he did not miss it one bit.

He did not miss the violent vomiting binges into a dirty trash can, passing out in random, uncomfortable places only to be sore for the rest of the week, the terrible migraines... and he most definitely didn't miss Pepper hating him.

He felt terrible.

He opened his eyes slowly and stared down at the wooden top of his desk. He didn't know why he

had driven himself to that point... he had known it wouldn't end well. He had just wanted the screaming to go away. He didn't want to have to think anymore. Because if he didn't think then he wouldn't have to remember their eyes. The look on Harley's face tore into him. The thought of what he had ruined broke him; and the all-encompassing guilt shattered him until he cried to the point he couldn't remember why. Then, he had gone to find Pepper in search of reassurance and comfort that she always provided him so he wouldn't end up doing something to himself that would leave her alone and sad. But he had promised he wouldn't do it again and now he was paying for it... Pepper hated him; and Peter too.

He had promised Pepper. He promised her never to do it again. Not after the horror story of what he had almost done to her that night. He couldn't remember anything after watching Coulson fall to the ground, but Rhodey filled him in on the rest of the events that had transpired later that night. It hadn't been pretty. Tony wouldn't have blamed Pepper if she never forgave him... but she did because she was a good person like that.

Tony smiled brokenly. He remembered the amount of groveling and apologizing it took for Pepper to finally speak to him again. Then, eventually she forgave him after he proved he was trying to change after months of abstinence. He had sworn to her that he would never hurt her; that he would do everything he could to keep her safe and happy... She had smiled at him as if she were the one to blame and she gave him a hug...

His smile falls into a clenched frown, eyebrows furrowing angrily at his broken promise. He breathed deeply and reached for the blade resting precariously on a pile of books. He stared at it for a moment before moving swiftly and pressing the point to the tip of his index finger. He didn't even flinch as he dragged the blade down the length of his finger, tracing the faded scar down to the center of his palm. He watched the blood pour from the familiar line he'd cut into his hand. He repeated the procedure with his next finger... then the rest. And soon he found himself staring at his hand, covered in blood, the thick crimson rivulets gathering into a large pool in the center of his palm then spilling over the sides and dripping onto his desk. He flexed his fingers, watching in sick fascination as the blood poured out even quicker. He remembered when he used to do this years ago; something to ground him. He remembered when his father would do this to him as a child; something to teach him to be strong. After every instance, he'd lose that many more nerves, which drove him to cut deeper next time around so he might be able to feel the sting. Through the years he cut deeper and deeper until he barely had any feeling left in the palms of his hands or the tips of his fingers anymore...

The only thing he hated about that was not being able to easily feel Pepper's soft hand when it was being held in his. The callouses and scars made sure of that... He wondered how the scars hadn't disgusted her back when they were ugly, red, and prominent. Now, they were barely a reminder of what once was. Though, after today they would be back... but he doesn't care because it's not like Pepper would be holding his hand anytime soon.

He still held the blade loosely in his hand, then lowered it slowly. He rested the point in the pool of blood at the center of his hand and he thought deeply about last night. It wouldn't take all that much effort to just slice downwards about five more inches. It wouldn't be that hard. It'd just be one movement. It would help him feel that nothingness he oh so craved. He could escape everything around him forever. He'd never have to worry about the aftermath-- the terrible vomiting and splintering migraines. Pepper wouldn't miss him, nor Peter or Harley. So... there was really nothing holding him back anymore.

Pepper would be well off without him. He had a safe house just for instances like this-- in a case that he may not return home. She would be able to run away with Peter, Harley, and Morgan. A beautiful log cabin by a lake. He knew she'd love it. And Rhodey would take good care of her

until Harley's old enough to shoulder the responsibility. Of course, she'd be perfectly capable without a man because for crying out loud it's Pepper! ... it's just reassuring to know she'd have someone to lean on if she happened to need help.

He smiled softly and pictured her bustling around the large home with Harley playing with Morgan and Peter helping her with dinner. It was a beautiful sight... and Tony knew it looked much better than it would have if he were in the picture disrupting the familial atmosphere. They would get along just fine without him. They'd be okay...

He pressed down on the knife...

"Sir, please don't cause any more harm to your person." JARVIS voiced, finally overriding his creator's earlier harsh command to "mute".

Tony growled, but he didn't move the blade. "Some things you just can't understand JARVIS. This is for the best. Mute."

"Sir," JARVIS voice sounds firm, "if you do not put down the knife, I will have no choice but to call for Sir Rhodes."

"Do not call Rhodes. Or anyone. That's an order."

"I apologize sir, but that order has been overridden by several protocol." JARVIS answered coolly.

Tony grit his teeth in defiance, knife pressing so hard into his hand he could finally feel the sharp sting. "What protocols?"

"The protocols meant to protect Mrs. Stark, Mr. Rhodes, Mr. Hogan and most recently Master Harley and Master Peter."

Tony rolled his eyes, but he still didn't put the knife down. "And how would my killing myself harm any of them."

"It would cause them extreme emotional distress, sir. Including but not limited to guilt, depression, anxiety, abandonment issues, and in some cases, people have been driven to insanity and severe mental health issues."

Tony snorted in exasperation. His head was pounding too hard, his heart hurt too bad and he just wanted it all to go away. He knew nobody would miss him. They would only benefit from his absence. And even if JARVIS happened to be right... he was a selfish bastard as so many people had pointed out time and time again... he doubts this would come as a surprise to some.

He dropped his head to look back down at the blade and his red palm. He adjusted his hold on the knife's handle and angled his wrist to easily slice further down. But before he could break more skin, he heard loud footsteps outside his office. He supposed JARVIS had already called someone... and they were running. That meant it had to be Rhodey. Only Rhodes would be so dramatic about him trying to kill himself. He found his eyes rolling in exasperation at the man's annoying mother-henning. Can't a man just commit suicide in peace?

Rhodey burst into the room, out of breath and eyes wild. He stared at Tony in horror, eyes flickering down to where Tony still held the knife precariously over his already lacerated palm.

"Tony," he spoke slowly, "put the knife down buddy."

Tony only looked at him, unamused by the dramatics of it all.

“Just leave platypus. It’ll be fine. I’ll write my final will and testament and everythin’ before I officially pass out. You can probably negotiate with Pep for half the big fat check that’ll be comin’ in the mail. But I don’t know... she might just settle on retiring and give you the company.” He shrugged his shoulder with a sigh like it was no big deal/

Rhodey shook his head, stepping further into the room. He looks on the verge of tears. “Please don’t Tony.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

Rhodey only glared at him...

There was a long silence as the two of them stared at each other, until Rhodey finally seemed to get an idea and he smiled.

“Because if you killed yourself right now, you wouldn’t have the chance to kill Parker. The honor would fall to me, and I doubt you’d want that.”

Tony perked up a bit at that. He sniffed vaguely and slowly pulled the knife away from his hand. The man definitely knew how to appeal to him. “I suppose you’re right. Gotta take care of business before I decide to off myself, right?” He huffed a laugh at that and stood from his chair.

Rhodey visibly sighed in relief. “Yeah, exactly. You also gotta tell me what to do with the kid. I’m not... I wasn’t sure how you wanted it handled exactly.”

Tony’s back was to him as he pulled on his jacket, but Rhodey could still see him stiffen at the mention of Harley.

“I was wrong ‘bout him. There’s no way it was him. I was just... I was just a little overwhelmed and I jumped to conclusions a bit too quickly.”

Rhodey smiled slightly. “Pepper’ll be happy to hear that.”

Tony nodded with pursed lips. He wiped the blood from his hand with several wipes leaving the blood-soaked rags on his desk. “I’m sure she will.”

Then with those last few words, Tony marched across the room and threw open the door. He left to go finish what needed to be done. That way he could finally feel accomplished with life as he drifted off into the heavy space of nothingness.

Harley lay curled up on his cot. Back to the door and arms wrapped tightly around his torso as he stared ahead with watery eyes. He didn’t know what to expect. He didn’t know what was going to happen to him. All he knew was Tony was mad at him and the door to his was locked. He was trapped, awaiting the wrath of a famously powerful mob boss who’d just been exposed on national television. This wouldn’t be ending so well for him, he’s sure.

Allen and Happy had easily caught up to him, being uncharacteristically sympathetic as they dragged him downstairs and locked him up in his room so he wouldn’t be able to run away again. He was fairly sure there were a couple guards stationed outside the door as well. He could hear their heavy footsteps periodically along with the faint mumblings of a brief discussion when they swapped shifts.

He shivered in anticipation. He hadn’t slept a wink and he was too scared to ask for the time. He couldn’t be sure if the night had already passed or if it had only been a couple hours. He kept the

lights off, hoping he may be able to drift off at some point, but all that did was make the situation all the more terrifying and depressing. He just-- he didn't know how much longer he could lay here without breaking down.

Allen had only told him they were waiting for further instruction from Tony... nothing else.

So, he waited and wallowed in his own misery. He thought of better times and dreamt of everything just being one ugly nightmare. He smiled stupidly as he closed his eyes and pictured waking up on the couch to the sound of Peter and Pepper laughing, and the smell of pancakes. He imagined the couch dipping and looking up to see Tony smiling down at him with that teasing grin of his. He looked much happier than he'd ever seen him... and Harley found himself being drawn towards the man.

"Ya sleep good kiddo?"

He could imagine himself nodding and rubbing his eyes. He could hear Peter's enthusiastic shout of *"Daddy we makin' panca'es!"* too and he felt a warmth bloom in his chest, especially when he saw the bright happiness on Tony's face because all was forgiven, and maybe they *could* be a normal family. He was their dad, Pepper was their mom, and all was right with the world.

Harley thought it might be nice to one day call someone Dad like Peter was able to. He'd never called someone Dad before. It felt like such a foreign word, but yet such an important one. And for a while there he was sure Tony would be the best candidate for the title. He was sure that maybe one day he'd be brave enough to whisper it to him after a movie or after he tucked him into bed (after that first night he wasn't too sure if that was only a onetime thing or what... he sure hoped it wasn't). A simple "goodnight Dad" would have filled him with a giddy warmth and he could almost picture Tony's smile: the same smile reserved for when Peter said the same thing. Boy, does he wish he had been brave enough. Maybe then Tony would have been quicker to forgive him. Maybe then it wouldn't have even crossed the man's mind that he might betray them because Harley was his son and he was Harley's dad.

"That's good," imaginary Tony said, reaching up to ruffle his hair.

Harley could feel himself leaning into it and he fought hard enough to imagine it that he could practically feel the warm hand cupped atop his head. Then a thought hit him, and he looked up at the man formed in his imagination.

It'd just be one word, and he wouldn't even have to say it out loud. He could risk it in his own mind, right? Nobody would hear him. He could just try it out one time... see what happens. See how he feels. He should do it before it's been too long to remember what hugs and love felt like.

So, Harley breathed deeply and squeezed his eyes shut even harder before leaning into imaginary Tony's body, imagining the man's strong arms wrapping around him in a warm hug. *"G'mornin' Dad,"* he imagined himself whispering into the man's shirt.

He felt the chuckle rumble through his dad's chest, and he hummed in contentment. "Good morning to you too, Pup. You're mighty cuddly this mornin'." The pet name made his heart soar and his grin widen. He's not even sure if that's something Tony would ever even consider calling him, but Peter's already coined all the good ones... maybe if he were Tony's kid too he'd get a special nickname that belongs just to him... something not meant to be degrading and teasing. Something that wasn't Sprout. Something that wasn't ordinary and without meaning. Something that wasn't Kid or Kiddo. He kinda liked it. Pup. It sounded nice. Bubba and Pup. He wondered what Morgan's might be.

He relished in the imaginary comfort for as long as he could. He never broke away from his imaginary dad and his imaginary dad never broke away from him, simply carding his fingers through his hair like Pepper would do.

It was a nice escape from reality and he's sure that if he's let to survive this wouldn't be the last time he imagined being a part of the Stark Family. Not the crime family... but a real Stark. As in Tony Stark and Pepper Stark's son. As in probably soon to be Peter Stark's brother, and of course the brother for his soon to arrive baby sister, Morgan. It's an innocent fantasy that'll help him get through life... he just... he hates thinking Tony's angry at him. He hates thinking he disappointed his could have been dad.

His trance is broken when he hears a pair of approaching footsteps and loud whispers.

"Is the kid asleep?" The muffled voice asked. Harley couldn't be sure if it were Rhodey or Happy. All he knew was the tone was familiar... and it sounded worried.

"I don't know. We haven't checked on him since yesterday. He was freaking out if we got anywhere near him. Didn't want to make it worse than it already was."

That was Happy... and Harley cringed at the reminder of how he had behaved the night before. He swears he'd never seen Happy look so remorseful. He was just-- he had been freaked. Everything happening at once. It was just overwhelming, and the events were far too familiar to past traumas than he would have liked.

"Tony's freaked," the voice he now assumed must be Rhodey's. "JARVIS called me just before he was 'bout to slice his wrist open."

"What?" Happy whispered vehemently...

Harley perked up in worry. *Tony had tried to off himself?* Why would he do that? Was it-- was it his fault. Was the belief that he had betrayed him drove him mad to the verge of killing himself. Did he almost make his imaginary father commit suicide?

Rhodey sighed shakily. "Yeah, I know... Pepper... she's pissed. Pete too. He-he went up there drunk last night. Freaked them both out and... and I think... it's gettin' to be a lot for him. He-he's convinced everyone hates him now, and I don't know how to fix it with something other than time, and I don't know how much of that he has before he tries it again."

"Is he okay now though?" Harley hoped he was. He couldn't imagine Peter having to lose another father, or Pepper losing her husband... all because of him and being stupid enough to let himself get attached to people again and letting them get attached to him in return.

"Yeah, he's off to do God knows what to Parker. I-I sent Wilson with him to keep an eye on him... he 'pparently used to be a therapist after his air force career went downhill... we could honestly use some of that 'round here, so it was nice to hear."

"Good," Happy sighed, "goodness, it would kill both the kids if he decided to do something like that. Not to mention Pepper. She'd never forgive herself..." both men seem to trail off after that and Harley found himself straining to listen for more in case they had lowered their voices even further. "He didn't happen to say what to do with the kid, did he?"

Harley's breath caught in his throat... he couldn't risk the sound of his own breathing to keep him from hearing Rhodes' answer. Whatever he was about to say would seal his fate.

"Yeah, he did..." Rhodey didn't seem all that upset... "he's... he's mad at himself for calling out

the kid like that, y'know. He told me it was all heat of the moment; doesn't believe a word he had said. It just... it just made too much sense to him for it to not be true. He doesn't want the kid hurt at all. I'll probably bring the kid up to see Pep and Pete after I talk to him." Harley gasped in relief, a wide grin spreading across his face. Tony believed him! It's gonna be okay. "They're both messed up 'bout all this. Talked to Pep this morning about it... but I just... I need to make sure. Tony's judgement is compromised and I gotta make sure he's right before I let that kid anywhere near them. What he said about doing to his mother... it doesn't sound all that wise to let him around Pep unsupervised, y'know."

"Yeah, but he's a good kid. Go talk to him."

Harley's excitement coursed through his entire body. He found himself growing giddy at the idea of being able to see Pepper and Peter again. His life wasn't completely ruined... yet. The thought made him pause. Just because he was proven to be no danger this time didn't mean he wasn't a danger to them. He couldn't-- he couldn't risk them getting hurt because of him. He wouldn't be able to handle it... Not if he let another mother and sibling get hurt at his hands.

The door opened with a loud creak and it breaks him from his debating thoughts. He sits up straighter and stares as Rhodey slowly makes his way into the room. Harley gulps and Rhodey takes a seat in the chair as the door slams shut behind him. The light flickers on above them.

"Sir," Harley greets stiffly. "I um... I heard ya talkin' to Happy. Is um... Is To-Boss alright?" Rhodey sighs. "He's... he's hangin' in there, don't worry. Once this mess is all cleared up, things'll go back to normal and he'll be good as new."

"Oh, okay," Harley nods, gaze dropping to his hands resting in his lap. "Ya also said you got questions for me. I'll tell you anything you want to know." He wanted to make sure Tony knew it wasn't him who had done this. He wanted Pepper to know too. He wanted them to know that he'd never do something like this to people he viewed as family.

"Yeah..." Rhodey trailed off, almost as if he were hesitant to continue. "I just want you to tell me the details of what happened with your mother. That's it..."

Harley's jaw tightened. He didn't want to. But he'd do it.

He nodded. "Okay."

Harley starts out strong. Steeling his face into a neutrally unperturbed expression as he recounts the events leading up to his mother's death. Memories wash over him as he speaks; memories that are so contrast from the ones he'd been imagining earlier, and he fights desperately to keep the shake out of his voice. He didn't want to cry in front of Rhodey. He *wouldn't* cry in front of Rhodey... he'd done enough crying lately as is.

"He um... he had dinner with us and-and I thought he might leave after that y'know... Thought he might change his mind after he had time to cool down..." Harley looked away from Rhodey's face and stared at the wall. "He grabbed my sister and put a gun to her head." He swallowed thickly recalling his sister's terrified scream and his mother's frantic shouts begging Richard to let her go... "I-I-I didn't know what to do..."

Richard adjusts his hold of the squirming girl, scowling in distaste. He hated doing these things himself, but he... gosh he just needed the Keeners to feel pain.

Harley stared at him with wide eyes and chest heaving with heavy breaths. He held out a hand to the man in a placating way and that just pissed the man off more.

Richard glared. "I want you to go get your gun kid," he instructed Harley, tightening his hold on the girl enough for her to scream out even louder in terror. Harley gulped and remained rooted to the spot, unsure if it would be safe to leave his family in the room alone with the insane man. Richard didn't seem to like his hesitance very much. "Go get your gun or I blast her brains across the kitchen table." His sister wailed, clawing at the man's jacket covered arm in a feeble attempt to escape.

"Richard, we don't have a gun in this house. Please, please just let her go. Whatever my husband did... I-I'm sorry..."

"Too late for that," Richard spat. And he turned back to Harley looking angry and Harley quickly scampered off to find the gun he kept beneath his mattress. He returned to find the situation unchanged and he felt his insides trembling in fear.

Richard didn't break his eyes away from him as he crept back into the room. He nodded at Harley's mother insistently.

"Shoot her."

"W-what?!" Harley cried, looking completely aghast by the instruction.

"I said shoot her. In the head... you'll wanna make it quick and painless for her, so don't miss." Richard smiled darkly.

Harley shook his head wildly. "No. I'm not going to shoot my mother!"

Richard's blank expression doesn't break. "You're either going to shoot her now or watch me shoot your sister then your mother. I won't be as merciful with my aim. I've never been an exceptionally good shot."

Harley doesn't move for a solid five minutes. He **knows** that's not true.

He runs several potential courses of action through his head like he'd been trained. Is there potential for both to survive? He had a gun in his hand, and he was a pretty good shot too... maybe he could work something out...

"Harley... baby," his mother speaks tentatively. His head snaps to look at her as she slowly sits down in a dining chair. "It's okay baby." Harley shakes his head frantically. "It's okay..."

"Harley no!" His sister cries. He turns to look at her trapped between the man's chest and his gun. He finds himself growing sick at the thought that he's not capable enough to protect them both.

"Harley," his mother's voice was stern. "Look at me."

He does even though he doesn't want to. He stares at her, ignoring his sister's screams.

"Shoot her Keener. You're running out of time."

He stares at his mom. He hates that he's not crying. He should be crying, right? He should be sobbing and bawling like his sister... he-he had to kill his mother to save his sister. He should be crying! "Harley, it's okay. Hurry up now Honey. It's going to be okay."

He hates that she's so resigned to her fate. She's putting up no fight as if she had been preparing for this very occurrence for the entirety of her short-lived existence.

“Ma, I can’t,” Harley croaks. “I can’t just...”

“Harley,” her gaze was stern as she locked eyes with him, chin down, looking at him through heavy eyelashes. “Keep your sister safe, okay? If it’s me over her; choose me. It’s either just me or both of us honey. Use that big brain of yours. We’re running out of time.”

“Ma, please,” he begged quietly, but his hand with the pistol lifted anyways. “Please don’t make me do this.”

“It’s going to okay Honey... and I don’t want you to blame yourself ever for this, okay?”

*“But-but it’s my fault,” he whispers through thick spit. “He’s here cuz I messed up. I-I’m so sorry... I didn’t mean to turn out like-like **him**.” He didn’t say the word, but she seemed to know what he meant.*

“You’re nothing like him, baby,” his mother smiles. His sister screams. Richard threatens to shoot once more.... And Harley cries. “You’re so much better than him. You’ll do amazing things, I believe that. The world is yours for the taking baby. Use it wisely.”

She closes her eyes and Harley hesitates.

“Close your eyes baby,” she whispers. He can still hear her though. “Don’t watch.”

He does as she says. He closes his eyes... and he doesn’t even have a moment to rethink. He pulls the trigger, opens his eyes, and just like that his entire world is torn apart and he’s sure he’d never be able to put it back together.

Harley stops, tears stinging his eyes. He still hadn’t looked at Rhodey yet, unsure how the man would react to his merciless shot. He’d shot his mother... he killed her.

Rhodes’ next words were soft and careful. “Where’s your sister?”

Harley forced in a deep breath through his open mouth and he blinked back tears. “She-- um... Richard Parker’s not good at keeping his word...”

The memory replays in slow motion. Richard walking his sister to the seat beside his mother. She was screaming and sobbing, but... he couldn’t hear her. He couldn’t-- he couldn’t move. He was-- he couldn’t breathe after it had happened, and he barely had time to react as Richard forced her into the seat and put a bullet between her eyes just as Harley had done to his mother. And the worst part was that he could have stopped it. He had the gun in his hand and he just stood there helplessly... and watched his sister be murdered. It was-- it was something terrible that he’d been conditioned to believe was his fault... Richard Parker was a manipulative freak and he hated the man for making him believe it was his own fault for killing his mother. He hated that the man was somehow capable of brainwashing him into remaining loyal. He hated that he hadn’t hated the man as much as he hated him now.

“I um-- I coulda shot him, but I...” he didn’t really know what he was planning to say, and he was cut off by a harsh sob... he’d... he’d never said the words out loud before. “I didn’t shoot him. I just... I just watched as he killed her. I--” his mouth opened; breath pushed from his lungs as he gasped through the next sob. “I... he just left like he’d finished an errand. I-- he left the gun on the table and-and told me how to cover it up y’know... I-I made eggs.” He choked and keeled forward, bending at the waist to press his forehead into his knees. He felt a heavy hand land on his back and the mattress dip beneath him. “I didn’t know how to make nothin’ else... I-I was s’posed to make it look like-like a surprise while they were eatin’ dinner an-and then I ran.” Rhodey didn’t move

his hand as Harley sobbed into his knees. "I'm sorry! I didn' wanna kill her! I was jus' tryin' to save my li'l sister."

"You did your best kiddo," Rhodey whispered softly, scooting closer so their bodies were pressed closer together. "You can't blame yourself for that. Tony'd be proud you were able to stay this strong for so long. You don't have to carry this weight by yourself anymore. We'll make it right. I promise."

Harley's head turns to the side and he stares at Rhodey. "I-I wanna watch him die Rhodey. So bad."

"I'm sure you do," Rhodey smiled encouragingly at him, ruffling his hair lightly. "Now, why don't I take you up to see Pepper and Pete. I bet their dying to see you're okay. And I'm sure Pep will watch movies with you all day."

Harley smiled at the thought of curling up on the couch with Pepper and Peter like he used to do with his mom and sister. Pepper gives good hugs; amazing hugs. She was warm and smelled like soapy brown sugar, and Peter was loud and joyful... being with them always made him feel alive... but he couldn't.

"I can't. Not right now..." he hoped Rhodey would understand. Thankfully, the man did, and he only smiled.

"Okay, I understand. Now, do you wanna be alone or do you want me to stay." Harley gulped... if it had been Tony... he might have asked him to stay. Maybe... but he was too used to dealing with this himself; he couldn't just up and change now.

"Alone, please."

Rhodey nodded. "Alright then. If you need anything at all just tell JARVIS. I'm sorry that we kept you locked in here all night kiddo; we just needed to be cautious until Tony got out of his funk and told us what was going on... he feels terrible for what he did by the way."

Harley only nods.

Rhodey pulls away and stands from the bed. "Alright. You can get up and leave whenever you feel like it. I'm sure you might be hungry too. Don't wallow by yourself too much. It's not healthy."

"Okay Rhodey," he smiled weakly. "I'll try."

"That's all I ask, kid."

Chapter End Notes

I know Peter isn't really in this chapter that much, but I kinda had to cut the planned chapter in half. I'm hoping to include him much more next chapter (but for the next couple chapters it's going to be mainly Tony and Harley POVs (you'll see what I mean soon)). Also, after this chapter, things should start looking up again, so at least that's something to look forward to, right?

And lastly... I hate to do this to y'all again, but works sending me out to DC for a while and I don't know how much time I'm gonna have to work on chapters. So... it may be a

few weeks till I can update (at least I didn't leave it on a bad cliffhanger, right? lol). This coming Friday I'll be in DC, then the next week I'll be in Missouri. Gosh, I'm uber busy ugh. Anyways, don't lose hope is basically what I'm saying. I have everything planned out... and who knows, I might be able to get most of it done with my phone... we'll see.

Anyways, I love you guys dearly. Thanks so much for reading. It makes me so happy to read all your comments and I hope to continue hearing from you guys, it makes me smile so big! Thank you! XOXOXOXOXOXO

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait guys! Gosh life is so chaotic especially around the holidays.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter didn't like yelling. It always made him feel so scared.

He burrowed beneath the covers and clamped his hands tightly over his ears in hopes it may be able to drown out the loud shouts of his mother and father's bickering down the hall. He didn't like it. He didn't like it when his Mama and Daddy yelled at each other so loud. His Mama always got hurt after and she'd cry for a long, long time in her room. He didn't like it when his Mama cried. It made him feel sad.

Yet, despite his attempts to drown the deafening hollers, his father's loud words could be plainly heard after the sound of a particularly loud slam.

"WHAT DA HELL MARY?!"

Peter didn't know what was going on. All he knew was that he wanted his Mama. He wanted her to come up and tuck him in like she promised him she would do an hour ago. He wanted her to come and read him his bedtime story and sing him a song like she always did before bedtime.

"WHAT WAS I SUPPOSED TO DO RICHARD?! It wasn't like you were around any!" His Mama hollered back...

Peter didn't understand the words too well. He was still learning how to talk. He was progressing slowly. His Daddy didn't seem to like it very much, though, and Peter didn't know how he was supposed to fix it. He didn't like it when his Daddy would call him a retard. He didn't know what it meant, but if the way his Mama would react was anything to go off of, then it couldn't have meant anything good. Peter didn't like being a retard very much. Not if it meant something so bad and made his daddy so mad.

"WELL YOU COULDA KILLT IT INSTEAD OF BIRTHING THE SMIMY BASTARD'S CHILD!"

"RICHARD! How could you say that?"

Peter whined loudly, hugging his knees even closer to his chest. He knew what kill meant... he didn't like that word very much. Mama explained it to him one time. It was when a person made another person dead. Then she told him that bein' dead, or killt, was like sleeping, but the person just wasn't allowed to wake up. That made Peter sad because that meant the person wasn't allowed to play anymore. They couldn't pet kitties. They couldn't build with cool blocks. And they couldn't give hugs anymore. That was really, really sad. Peter didn't know what he'd do if he wasn't allowed to do those things anymore.

"I'M GONNA KILL 'IM!"

Peter flinched and cried harder. His Daddy was going to kill someone. He didn't like that. He didn't like that a person wouldn't be able to hug and smile and laugh anymore because of his

Daddy...

"He's long gone Richard. He left his family years ago. No one knows where he is."

Peter wasn't sure what they were talking about. It wasn't like he cared either... he just wanted his Mama's hugs to make him feel better and so they might stop yelling so loud.

Eventually, enough was enough and Peter kicked the blankets off his bed, and he bolted from his room, tears streaming down his cheeks and arms outstretched in anticipation to be cuddled by his Mama. He just wanted the yelling to stop. It was too, too loud.

He rounded the corner of the hallway and he slowed slightly as he kneaded the heels of his palms into his eyes to wipe away the stinging tears. His onesie scratched at his already irritated skin and his covered feet felt slippery against the hardwood floor. He held his Teddy in the hand wiping away tears and he stopped to brace his other hand against the wall as his chest heaved with his stuttering sobs, bottom lip being pulled into his mouth with every harsh intake of breath.

A low, threatening whisper from the living room grabbed his attention though and he sniffed pitifully as he looked towards the dimly lit room barely seen around the corner. He saw his daddy and his mommy. His daddy looked mad.

"I swear I' gonna kill ya for this," his father slurred. "You broke ma heart Mary. Can't believe you'd have the balls to do this."

Peter watched worriedly as his father stepped closer to his Mama. His Mama stumbled back a step in response. Peter thinks she looked scared and he felt his own body lurch forward as if he were ready to run and catch her if she fell. His advance stopped as she spoke, though, and he watched on with wide eyes.

"Richard stop," she whispered with a waver in her voice, hand outstretched in a poor attempt to halt the man's advance on her. "You're drunk. It was a mistake. I'm sorry."

"Too late fur that."

Peter watched with wide, teary eyes as his father pushed his mother to the floor. He gasped. His feet moved him closer and he was ready to run to help his Mama, but he froze when he saw what lay discarded on the coffee table. It was one of his Daddy's smelly bottles. That was why his Daddy was talking so weird. That's why Daddy was so mad.

He stared at his father's hunched over, teetering form as he loomed over his mama. Peter knew that word. Mama told him it to explain why Daddy got so mean sometimes.

*He was **drunk**.*

Peter whined softly, hand lifting to his mouth. Mama was in trouble! His daddy had been drinking again. Daddy wasn't so nice when he drank from his smelly bottles. He was always so mean to Peter when Peter didn't mean to be bad. He'd get so, so, so many spankings when his daddy'd see him after he'd drunken from the smelly bottles.

But he still needed to help Mama! He couldn't let Daddy hurt Mama! Maybe if Daddy hurt him instead, he would forget about hurting his mama and about being mad at her.

Peter was just a bit too late though. One blurred moment later and the next thing he knew, Daddy was pulling out something small and shiny from behind his back and then there was a really, really loud bang that made Peter's ears hurt so bad. His hands had clamped over his sensitive ears and

his eyes squeezed together tightly as tears spilled down his cheeks. He was so scared. The noise was so **loud**. Peter sniffled and the ringing didn't stop... but he needed to make sure his mama was alright. She might be scared from the loud noise too. So, he opened his eyes slowly and looked into the room. Mama was laying on the ground and she wasn't moving at all. Peter knew she must have been hurt.

He ran into the room. He ran up to his Mama and he saw the red on her shirt. A bright, ugly red... it had been Peter's favorite color before, but he didn't like it so much anymore. It was an ugly color and he hated it now. He hated it for forever.

"Mama? Mama? You 'kay? Mama? Mama?" He cried as he gently patted his mother's cheek. He was squatting next to her motionless form, chubby legs bent far enough so his bum barely brushed the ground. Tears fell from his eyes when she didn't respond to him. He didn't understand... why wasn't she answering him? He patted her cheek again, but, again, she didn't answer, so he turned to look up at his daddy.

"Daddy? She no- she no... she no 'kay?"

His daddy looked upset. Peter didn't understand. Was his Mama too hurt to answer him? Why would Daddy hurt her so much? Maybe she was just sleeping because she got so tired of yelling... but what was the ugly red? Was it like the red from when Peter scraped his knee?

But-but there was so much... how could there be so much? His mama must be so, so hurt. She must hurt so, so bad.

Then a thought hit him...

Was-was Mama killt? Is this what not being able to hug and smile and play and pet kitties anymore looked like? Peter had never actually seen someone who was killt before...

"C'mon Pete." His daddy picked him up. Peter froze... his daddy never picked him up. Only his mama... "Your mama needs time to rest."

Peter cried... he didn't understand.

Why wasn't she okay? Why wasn't his mama okay?

His father started walking towards the hallway again and Peter stared over the man's shoulder at his mother's lifeless form sprawled on the carpet. Why wasn't Daddy worried? Was she gonna be okay? Was she killt? Would she still be able to hug Peter? Laugh and smile with him? Would she be able to build blocks with him and read him his favorite books? Was she gonna be okay?

"Let's get you back to bed kid."

Peter didn't like it. He didn't want to go back to bed.

He wanted his Mama.

Peter blinked awake slowly, a strained whine scratching against the back of his throat as he floated back into the land of the living. He wanted his Mama. He could see the vague images flashing across the forefront of his mind like it was only a distant memory. He barely registers the memory of his father tucking him into bed that night with a kiss to the forehead and a promise that everything would turn out alright in the end.

He remembered it hadn't.

Then he cried.

He tossed his head around, looking around the room in search of his PepPep. He was sure he'd fallen asleep beside her... but now she was gone. He didn't know where she could possibly have went.

He sits up a little straighter in his bed and rubs his eyes with his fisted hands. He sniffles and a small sob escapes his mouth as he whines. He felt so alone, and he didn't want to be alone. He *hated* being alone. Bad things happened when he was alone.

"Mommy?" He cried out helplessly, hoping somehow Pepper would hear his distressed call. He just wanted Pepper. Or maybe even Tony... He just wanted someone to hug him, cuddle him, and tell him he was safe and loved and that there was no reason to be scared.

He never liked remembering the night his father killed his Mama. It made him so sad.

"Ha'ley?" He called out fruitlessly in hopes that maybe the previous day had all just been a part of the terrible nightmare too and that his new brother was simply a single bed away.

Harley didn't answer.

He missed his big brother.

He rubbed at his eyes again and called out for Pepper once more... she still didn't answer. So... he tried Tony.

"Da-Daddy?" He whispered meekly into the dark room.

He still hasn't forgiven him for what he did to Harley... but Rhodey said he was really sad about what he did. Peter still didn't know what to think about it. He didn't know what Daddies were supposed to do or not do beyond what Harley had already told him. He just... he just wished Harley was there so he could explain if Tony was still his daddy or not. He didn't like not knowing if Tony was allowed to be his daddy. All he knew was that he was tired, scared, and alone and he wanted PepPep and Tony. Anybody, really.

He wiped his eyes angrily and huffed as he crawled his way towards the edge of the bed. If they weren't going to come to him, he'd just have to go find them. He didn't want to be alone anymore. And he was always allowed to sleep in their big comfy bed after a bad nightmare... Tony would always let him cuddle a whole lot if he was really sad.

He sniffed and rubbed his nose. He wanted to cuddle.

He reached the door, barely tall enough to grab onto the handle and push it open. He heard muffled sounds from the outside of his room, and he frowned, pushing his body weight against the door to open it fully. As soon as the barrier between his room and the outside was pushed aside, he could suddenly register the familiar sounds of a heated argument breaking out somewhere within the large penthouse. He found his lip began to tremble and he felt a heavy weight fall into the pit of his stomach, accentuating the panic from his nightmare. Someone was yelling. Someone was going to be killt. He didn't want someone to die.

Then he heard PepPep's voice... his Mama's voice. She was yelling. She was mad... his Mama was mad. She was going to get hurt. She was gonna be killt.

He had to be quicker this time! He had to get there before something really bad happened and she wouldn't be able to hug him and Harley anymore.

He sprinted towards the large Living Room where he could hear the voices, and as he drew closer, he could hear the distinct sound of a loud smash and then cracking and crumbling. Then he heard Tony too... he heard him yell back... and he was mad. He was mad at Mama. Daddy was mad at Mama. Daddy was mad at his Mama again and he was gonna kill her. No. He wouldn't let it happen.

"It's my fault!! I know!!! I messed up. You don't gotta shove it in my face!!"

He froze at the end of the hall, still hidden by the shadows. He stared out at the two adults he had grown to love. PepPep and Tony. PepPep and Tony... Mommy and Daddy.

A hiccupped sob was muffled through the hand he held pressed to his mouth. Tony wouldn't do this. Tony wasn't like his father. Tony was his Daddy...

Tony was crying... his father never used to cry like that when he was angry.

Peter didn't understand. The yelling had ceased and for a moment he thought the fight may have ended. He stepped forward an inch, ready to run into the room with his arms outstretched so he could be cuddled and coddled by both his parents for the rest of the night and be tucked into their big warm bed between them. He was just so upset... he missed Harley and his old Mama. He just... he just wanted everything to be okay. He wanted to sleep in their big comfy bed so Daddy could chase away the evil dreams and so Mommy could keep him extra warm and comfy.

But before he could enter the room, Tony stepped closer to his Mama... he stumbled. His eyes were weird, and his body moved differently... and he looked sick. For a moment he was worried Tony may be really sick, but then his body swayed in a scarily familiar motion as he lifted an arm towards PepPep. Peter's mouth opened in horrified realization. His head snapped every which way as he examined the room for the sight of a familiar bottle... he had never seen Tony drink from one before... but-but maybe he did.

There was no bottle though...

Peter cried big, fat, ugly tears and he wiped furiously at them. He didn't understand. Tony would never hurt PepPep. He loved her so much. He loved Morgi so much too. He would never hurt them. He wouldn't. Peter knew that.

So, he stayed put. He didn't want to make him mad. Tony had already gotten mad at Harley and almost hurt him too... but Peter knew he wouldn't hurt his Mama. He just wouldn't. He couldn't be drunk because there was no smelly bottle, so he couldn't hurt her. Never.

He watched as Tony stepped closer to PepPep again... and for some reason PepPep looked scared. She had never looked at Tony like that... then something she said made Peter's breath hitch...

"Tony, don't--" she warns with a shaky voice. She holds out a hand to stop him and takes a step away, but Tony ignores her. He takes another large step towards her. "Tony no! Don't make me call Rhodey up here. You're *drunk*... don't--just don't."

Drunk. Tony was drunk. He was gonna kill his Mama. His Daddy was gonna kill his Mama again. He couldn't let it happen. Never, never, never.

He doesn't remember much of what happened after that. He functions on a blind rage and a devouring fear that he may lose more of this family he had just found.

But he does remember later that night. After Tony left and his Mama was safe, Mama tucked him into her large bed right next to her. She held him and rocked him and sang him a soft song as he

cried. He cried about Harley, about his Mother, about his father, about almost losing his new Mama, and finally... about losing the Daddy he'd always wished to have. Tony was bad... Tony was so, so bad... he tried killing his Mama; he hurt Harley. Tony was just like his father.

"He wasn't going to kill me, Baby." Pepper whispered repeatedly into his ear as she rocked him in her arms. "He was just sad and confused and he probably just wanted a hug."

Peter remembered her words clearly. He remembered shaking his head insistently because he had seen it happen. Twice. He knew what was happening. He wasn't stupid. Tony may have been able to trick him into thinking he was his and Harley's new Daddy, but now Peter knew the truth now.

He wasn't stupid anymore.

He hated Tony.

Harley lingered in the room for a while after Rhodey left. He had no plans on leaving the confines of the small room ever again. He couldn't ever get hurt if he never left, right? He paced and grumbled and seethed, sitting down on the bed, standing up, then sitting down again. His hands were twitchy and there was an irritating tingle in his legs. It was like the sudden inexplicable urge one might randomly get to punch a chair for no reason other than simply wanting to.

There was no chair to punch though.

So, instead, Harley punched the wall... and it hurt like a bitch too. He instantly regretted it.

"Shit," he whispered through a heavy breath, clutching the wrist of his injured hand.

"Are you alright, Master Keener?" JARVIS sounded from above. Harley's head snaps up to look at the ceiling. JARVIS had never spoken to him in his room before and remembering that the AI had eyes everywhere caught him just a bit off guard.

"Yeah," he grunted. "Just gettin' rid of some frustration is all."

Oh boy was that the understatement of the century. He didn't even know what he was thinking or feeling anymore. He's felt a lot of different things over the course of his short life, mostly consisting of anger and terror. So, these new things-- love, heartbreak, sadness-- they were new to him.

He took another heavy seat on the edge of his bed and bent his head to stare at the hand he's cradling in his lap. He growls, frustrated with the unfamiliar conflicts that were slowly beginning to spiral him into a panic attack.

He wants to go see Pepper and Peter. He wants to go tell them he's okay. He wants to watch dumb Disney movies with them. He wants to sleep in that ridiculously comfy bed in Peter's room. He wants to listen and preen as Pepper drowns him in praise and affection after accomplishing one of her tasks. He wants to help Tony in his workshop. He wants to apologize to him. He wants to hug him... but he also wants to punch him too-- just like that *'chair'*--... if that made any sense. He just-- the thought of the man made him so angry now. He didn't understand it. Before... he'd been desperate for any lingering thought of Tony's kindness, but now... he didn't understand.

Harley feels another nerve snap and his entire body convulses with a violent tremor as he leaps unwillingly from the bed. And a sudden thought hits him. This conflict that was eating him from the inside out was all Tony's fault! All of it! This ravaging guilt boiling in his stomach is all because of Tony.

Harley had told him - he *told* him to stop treating him different. He told him to stop pampering him and being nice... he told him to stop caring and start acting like a normal Don, but he didn't. The man wouldn't listen.

He'd even warned him of their inevitable downfall of the domestic life he'd unofficially invited Harley to join. Harley had argued; he had told him specifically that he was going to mess everything up one way or another, and the stubborn man wouldn't listen to him! Instead, he had lied... he said that anything Harley could possibly do would be forgiven. That Harley was good. That he was incapable of something terrible enough to deserve his hatred. Tony had lied.

And the worst part was that Harley had actually believed him too.

Harley sniffed and ran his sleeve beneath his nose. His face puckered as he fought off the tears and he pushed out a shuddered breath from between his cracked lips.

Tony had lied to him.

Tony hadn't forgiven him for what he did... for-for something that he hadn't even done. Tony accused him of something that he could never even dream of doing. He immediately assumed Harley would be the one to betray his trust.

Tony had threatened him, and Harley swears he had never seen the man look so angry before. He was convinced that Tony would have done as he threatened if Harley had carried out what he had been accused of. Tony would have killed him he's sure of it and that thought made him sick... Tony had been lying the whole time.

It was like a punch to the gut, knowing the only man he had ever trusted in his life would so easily turn on him. The man that claimed to trust him apparently didn't trust him at all. It was like- it was like Richard Parker all over again. He had been manipulated into trusting someone he shouldn't be trusting.

He had trusted Richard, but then the man tore apart his family and manipulated him into shouldering all the blame... and Harley had believed him for a long time too. It had never once occurred to him that it may not have been his own fault that this family was all dead.

And now here he was. He had been tucked away into this poor excuse of a bedroom bearing all the guilt and blaming himself for all that had happened. For years he had been conditioned to take fault, so he believed he had really put Pepper and Peter in danger. That Tony had every right to be mad at him. He had believed it, but now that his head was clearing and the overwhelming events weren't clouding his judgement, it was clear to him now. This was all Tony's fault. He was not to blame.

This heartbreak, loss, and sadness he felt was all Tony's fault.

Tony was the one that had grown attached to him after all. He and Pepper both. They were the ones who had decided to trust him. They were blind and stupid to trust him so easily. Now, everything was broken, and betrayal was being shouldered on both sides of the pond.

Harley scowled. Things always went to shit when feelings got involved. There was always something to lose when you felt attachment... he learned that the hard way.

Tony and Pepper shouldn't have been so intent to invite him into their family. He had barely known them for a month. Both of them should have known better. They were experienced in this line of work. They should have known the repercussions their actions would have brought not only him,

but them as well.

Heck, Harley had even known better. He tried to prevent this heartbreak. He really did. But now here he was, fantasizing over some domestic shit with a fake mother he had no business loving, a fake brother he had time and time again failed to protect, and a fake father that had lied to him and believed him to be a traitor. He wipes furiously at his eyes as tears began spilling down his cheeks.

And that's another thing too! He's apparently a huge crybaby now. He swears he's cried more these past two weeks than he has in his whole life.

He had never been allowed to cry before. Not around his father. Not around Richard... but now here Tony is, waltzing around, promoting healthy coping mechanisms, and now he's turned into a goddamned crybaby. It was disgusting, really. Harley was disgusted with himself. He used to be able to handle anything, and now the mere prospect of disappointing some fake family had him near a breakdown, curled up in a bed, fantasizing about hugs and dads and love. He was truly a disgrace to all he's worked for.

He was a baby that needed to get over himself! He was so stupid.

Some part of him wishes he had never met Tony Stark or Pepper. After all, you can't miss something you never had.

It probably wasn't too late though... he'd only known them for a short while. His attachment was still in its beginning stages, it could easily be cut off without any major consequences...

With that final thought, his face sets into a determined frown and he flings himself from the bed. He marches around the room, gathering the very small sum of clothes that had been donated to him on his arrival. He shoves it all into a worn backpack he found abandoned in the closet not long ago.

There isn't much for him to pack so it doesn't take him awfully long.

"Master Keener," JARVIS speaks again, "you are not planning on leaving, are you? The Boss does not permit you to leave the premises without his explicit permission."

Harley stiffens, slowly pulling the zippers together. Screw Tony Stark. Screw his rules. The man lied to him. He betrayed him. And he's ruined him; turned him into some sensitive little schmuck. He has no right to keep him locked away in this stupid tower like some Disney princess.

Still... Harley doesn't know if he'll be able to bounce back from knowing he had to give up something so great; A life with so much potential. He knows he will regret it for the rest of his life... but he knows he'll regret it more if he stays. Like he had told Tony, bad people aren't allowed to love things because loving something meant karma had something worthwhile to take away.

Harley can't tell JARVIS he's leaving though. JARVIS is a snitch.

"I'm just packing my things to take upstairs is all." He answers easily, without a single waver to his voice.

"Would you like me to announce your planned arrival to Lady Stark?"

"No, that's alright. I want it to be a surprise. And I have to take care of a few things first." Harley wracked his brain trying to find some way to make his quick escape without getting caught. He turns his head towards the ceiling once more. "Hey J... where is the Boss now?"

"He is off site dealing with a classified leak regarding Hydra's latest attack."

Harley nods slowly and shoulders his bag. A plan was already in the making.

"Good to know."

He exits his room slowly. He glances down the hall in search of the guards that had been outside his quarters earlier, but they must have left after Rhodey came to visit and cleared his name. Harley feels just a bit better at that.

"J, I need you to disable Tony's protocol to not let me leave the Tower. I need to pick up something for Peter down the street. I don't want to interrupt the Boss during important business." Harley instructs with an authoritative voice. Pepper told him to always sound sure or he'd never get anything he wanted.

"Sir, I apologize, but you are not authorized to enforce that command. Would you like me to call the Boss for you to request your leave."

Harley frowns. He knew it was a long shot. JARVIS was an AI after all. AI's weren't as apt to being tricked as a human he supposed.

"No, no, that's fine." Harley pauses and glanced around the hall. He needed to find a way to get into JARVIS' mainframe. His entire code should be weakened from the recent attack... it shouldn't be too difficult to get his hands on.

Then with that, he got an idea.

He needed a computer.

"So, um, Richard Parker..." Sam trailed off slowly as he walked alongside Stark. The guy wasn't looking too great that was for sure and Sam wasn't all too clear as to why Rhodes had asked *him* of all people to watch over the man. "What'd he do?"

"He's Oscorp," Stark answered through gritted teeth. He sounded like he was toeing the line of an angry outburst, but Sam kept his spine straight and his chin up.

"Well duh, I knew that," he scoffed with a laugh. "Just wondering what made him so special. From what I know, you usually kill these guys right off the bat. Something special about this one?"

"Hmph," Tony grunted, turning another corner. They passed a hoard of about ten younger men whispering and laughing as they walked, but then they spotted Tony and all movement and chattering immediately stopped as they began to pass by... but Stark didn't seem so happy about that. He whirled around on his heels and leveled the group with a glare and a loud growl. "What're ya standing around here for?! Stop staring and do something useful before I break your legs and give you a real excuse to laze around."

All ten of them straightened and lifted a hand to salute Tony before they scampered off to go find something useful to do. Tony mumbled something incoherent under his breath and continued walking down the way they were headed. Sam followed without another word. Geez, the man was definitely grumpy this morning... that playfulness and snarkiness from the last few times they'd interacted were gone, but Sam could understand why. The guy was going through a lot; he needed to let off a little steam some way or another.

They reach a door made of heavy metal. One that looks remarkably similar to the one in the room

Sam had been held in while waiting for Stark to make an appearance.

“Keep your trap shut,” Stark commanded him with a heavy voice before opening the door and shoos the two guards lingering inside to station themselves outside the door.

“Parker,” Tony speaks, voice gravelly and strained from his morning’s events. He doesn’t face the man. His back is to him as he studies the display of various tools and weapons that had been laid out on the table across the room from where the man was tied to a chair. Sam stayed near the door, looking between Stark and Parker to try and discern where the heavy tension may have originated from. This wasn’t a simple Stark vs. Oscorp quarrel. There was something else going on. His best guess was it had something to do with Peter.

“Stark,” Parker responded hoarsely. He visibly gulped after he spoke, dehydrated, and exhausted. Bandages were wrapped around one of his arms. Splints were holding each of his fingers together on the other. Stark had definitely done a number on him already.

Tony still didn’t turn around. Not until he chose which weapon he desired. He settled for a thin bladed knife and turned around. “Your time’s up. Any last words?”

Sam remained uncharacteristically silent as he was instructed as he studied Richard Parker’s face. He was scared, that much was obvious.

“You don’t wanna do this Stark.” He forced out. “There’s still so much you don’t know.”

Stark stepped towards him and his expression remained neutral as he stares down at him. “My desire to kill you has far outweighed my patience.”

Parker can’t seem to find anything else to say. He pushes against the back of his chair, leaning away as much as he can as Tony continues his trek forward. His mouth opens and quivers as if he’s trying to speak, but nothing beyond a small hiss escaped his mouth.

Tony drops to one knee in front of the man in the chair and grabs his arm, beginning to slowly unwrap the bandaging that Bruce must have put on him last night. “Let’s continue where we left off, shall we?” He doesn’t hesitate to begin slicing through the irritated skin, but he barely makes it an inch before Parker is kicking him away and speaking once more.

“S-S-Stark wait,” he gasps. “Wait, let’s make a deal.”

Tony doesn’t seem interested. He simply grabs onto the man’s ankle which had been kicking at his chest, and twists until he heard the loud snap and the ear-piercing scream that followed it.

“Don’t touch me, Parker.”

Parker gasped for air, straining against the ropes tying him down. “Wait. Please. I’ll tell you more...”

Stark stares at him, blank and dark as his eyes bore into the pale face of his victim.

“I’m afraid I have nothing left on my bucket list before I die, except killing you. I’m no longer interested in whatever it is you have to say.”

“What if- what if...” he stutters with a deep intake of breath. “What if it’s about Peter?”

Sam watches as Stark pauses legitimately for the first time that morning. The hand wielding the weapon drops slowly and he waits for Richard to continue.

“There’s so many things you don’t know yet...” Richard bargains. “How about, for every day you hold off on killing me, I’ll share with you something that would be worth your while.”

Tony considers him for a moment then gets to his feet. He turns to address Sam who was still standing idly by the door. Sam stares back, catching, for the first time, a real glimpse at the man’s aging face. His wrinkles are more prominent, and his skin is pale. Heavy bags of purple rested beneath his eyes and his eyes were dark; very dark. It was a look Sam had grown familiar with during his time in the military and the brief time afterwards during his volunteer years to assist veterans suffering traumas. Stark was broken and he needed to be fixed. His earlier doubt about the man was replaced with an empathetic respect for him and the misguided good he was striving to accomplish.

“What’s your take Wilson?” Stark questions him. Sam isn’t sure what to say. The decision as to whether a man should live, or die is a heavy one. One he doesn’t feel fit to bare.

“You still haven’t told me what it is he’s done.”

Stark scowls at him and turns back to Richard. “Fine. You better give me something extraordinary, though, or I’ll slit you down the stomach, turn you inside out, and make you watch.”

Richard Parker doesn’t hesitate to leap into his confession. “Oscorp’s partnering with the Ten Rings. We um... we were working with Stane as well. He dealt us weapons and your technology to help with our research an-and,” Richard coughed several times and closed his eyes as he carefully took another breath. “Stane wanted you gone, ‘cause you were messin’ with our advancing and all that, so he somehow got you to Afghanistan. I don’t know the details, but... Ten Rings needed help with finishing their machine, so two birds one stone, y’know...”

Tony narrowed his eyes. That wasn’t good enough. He already knew those things. So, he stepped forward and pressed the point of his blade to the edge of the man’s chin, lifting his head up so he would meet his eyes... but there was one thing that had been pressing on his mind... “Did Ten Rings kill my parents?”

Richard shook his head. “I-I don’t think so. They may have killed your mother, but I’m certain that Obadiah was the one to kill your father.”

Tony dropped his hand away and turned his back, so he was facing the table again. He set the knife down carefully. He felt his chest swelling with something, whether it was anger or sorrow he wasn’t sure. It was something between the two. Obadiah killed his father. He shook his head.... Obadiah must have been working for Hydra... Perhaps his father had found out about it.

His mother though. Had his mother suffered? Did his father know? Had she been captured and tortured too?

The facts of his parents death had always eluded him. He had been in Italy when it happened. When he returned Obadiah had told him it was a car accident... that the car had caught fire. He had advised that Tony not request to see the bodies.

He could have stood there for a minute, perhaps ten. He wasn’t sure. But he was broken from his trance when there was a loud knock on the door, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Saved by the bell.

He turned his head and nodded at Sam for him to open the door. The man opened the door and Allen stood stiffly on the other side, looking both excited and perturbed.

“Sorry to interrupt sir,” he immediately squawked, “but-but um we got a location on where those drones were being operated from.”

“Finally,” Tony sighed, shoulders sagging with relief. He felt that he was finally getting somewhere. “Don’t um... you haven’t told anyone else yet, have you?”

Allen shook his head. “Great.” He glances at the two other guards outside the door. “You two. Report to Hogan, don’t leave his sight. Have another pair escort Parker back to his room. Give him a drink and a meal. That’s it. Allen and Wilson, you’re with me. Let’s go.”

He marched out of the room and the two men followed.

Harley avoided any eye contact with the others. Supposedly, no one was aware of what went down in the penthouse earlier, but he still felt like an outcast amongst the group of heavily armed, trained soldiers who could snap his neck in a matter of minutes. There were only a select few who reminded him of himself; twig-like stature and a horrendous inability to fight according to Happy. He wasn’t able to watch them firsthand yet, but the picture in his mind made him smile.

He recognized the faces he saw but knew almost none of the names. There were too many of them. He’d been around long enough that he knew of just about everyone though; their station and who they worked under based on which cliques he’d seen them conversing with. So, when he rounded the corner and came across a new face altogether, guarding the training room and armory, he was a little surprised. It seemed a little odd that a single guy who looked barely into his thirties was left alone to watch over the most sought-after room in the Tower.

But, either way, Harley saw it as an opportunity. He took a deep breath and tried his best to recall the few tips Pepper would offer him on occasion. He concentrated on the way Tony would act and speak; Pepper’s particular choice of words and tone; and of course, Happy’s scary glare. He actually practiced the glare a few times in the mirror once. He cringed at the reminder of his childish actions; glad he had never gotten caught.

Confidence was key, though. He belonged here, he told himself. Heck, as far as anyone knew, he was still the Boss’ favorite-- besides Peter of course.

So, with one last steady breath, he fixed his face with a stony expression and rounded the corner with a hand in his pocket. He approached the heavy set of doors and nodded at younger looking man with the rifle. He held his breath as he reached for the door... anyone who was anyone knew he wasn’t allowed in here alone.

“Hey kid. You don’t look like you belong in there.”

Harley was panicking big time, but he didn’t let it show. He fought to keep his innocent demeanor and it was much harder than he expected. He would definitely need more practice if he planned to make a living off of doing this.

“Rhodes asked me to grab him something.”

The guy narrowed his eyes. “Rhodes?” Harley nodded. “Grab what?”

“His... hoodie.”

The guy looked like he was trying hard not to laugh. Harley frowned.

“His hoodie?”

And yeah... that sounded ridiculous. Harley sighed at his own stupidity and pressed his hand to his face and an idea hit him. Misdirection. "Listen man, do me a solid a'ight. My dad's gonna kill me. I took his special knife that I'm not s'posed to touch and I brought it with me when I came down to train with Happy. Turns out," he lifts his hands in a 'what can you do' gesture and pursed his lips together, "I left it in there like the idiot I am. So, now I gotta run it back up to his office in the penthouse before he gets home and finds out I touched it. He's been in such a pissy mood lately I don't wanna make it worse."

The guy's eyebrows rose.

"You-your Dad... in the penthouse?"

Harley cackled evilly on the inside, but let his mouth drop and eyes widen as if he were totally horrified with himself. "Shit." He whispered in faux panic. "You can't say anything. You gotta swear it. He'll kill you, then he'll kill *me*."

The poor guy turned pale. "Yeah, yeah. Um... I'll help you look for it."

Harley shook his head at him and lifted a hand. "No, it's fine. I know exactly where I left it. You need to make sure no one else comes in, 'cause technically I'm not supposed to be here."

"Yeah, just make it quick alright."

Harley grinned at him and scampered into the room, releasing the breath he had been holding pumped his fist in the air. *He did it!*

"Yeah," he whispered to himself. He glanced around the room in a hurry, because he needed to be quick before this guy gets suspicious. He runs over to the back wall he knew the guns were hiding behind. He presses the button he'd watched Happy press so many times before and watched as the large tiles of wall turned to show off the shiny weapons on display.

"What to take, what to take." Harley muttered to himself as he scanned the array of weapons. There was most definitely a variety to choose from. All the way from special Assault Rifles to small tranq guns Tony calls Freezers. He settles for grabbing a Freezer and a couple more casings. He grabs a couple knives too, just in case.

"Master Keener, I believe you are prohibited from touching the weapons."

Harley wants to punch the AI in the face so bad.

"You're right JARVIS, but as you can see, I'm not grabbing anything dangerous. This was just another one of Pepper's tests. She wanted to see if I could sneak in here by myself and steal some stuff without anyone noticing."

"I have no recollection of her giving you this assignment."

"You've been malfunctioning all day JARVIS," Harley spat out in annoyance, "you've been missing a lot of things lately. Don't start accusing me of shit like Tony did."

"I apologize, sir. Continue on."

Harley sighed in relief and continued checking off the his mental list of things he'd need for his escape, and he grinned at the thought of this being like that game Escapist Tony would sometimes let him play on his phone... he rocked at that game.

When he was finished, he rushed out of the room, and nodded at the man still stationed outside.

“You find it?”

Harley holds up one of the random knives he’d grabbed and smiled. “Yep, thank goodness.” He paused and narrowed his eyes. “Remember... don’t tell anyone what I told you. It’s, like, super classified. The highest classified you can get.”

“Will do, kid.” The guy laughed then nodded his head and smiled at him. Harley smiled back. He kinda liked this dude.

“What’s your name?” Harley asked, simply out of curiosity.

“My name’s Scott. Scott Lang.”

“Nice to meet ya dude.” Then with that, Harley marched off with his stolen weapons concealed beneath his jacket. He stored that bit of information at the back of his mind, thinking that if he was somehow dragged back to this place, kicking and screaming, that Scott Lang would be kinda fun to hang around with.

But he shook that thought from his mind because that wouldn’t be happening, and he went off to find a computer.

He ended up swiping Asher’s laptop from the lounge area because the dude was really bad at taking care of his stuff and Harley kinda hated him. The man deserved it. So, he sat on the floor, plugged into the nearest outlet, and quickly bypassed the login screen as he took a large bite of the apple he’d swiped from the kitchen on his way there.

“Hmm,” he hummed. “Where to start, where to start.” He paid no mind to the bustling taking place around him and continued his work. He wasn’t the best at the coding and hacking thing. He was much better with his hands... but still... he wasn’t the worst. He sorted through files and broke through mainframe barriers until he found what he needed.

He hesitated for a moment as the mouse lingered over the ‘shut down’ button. He’d hate to cause more trouble to the security. He didn’t want to risk putting Pepper and Peter at risk for real.

So, he only deactivated JARVIS’ cameras near the garage exit for the next 30 minutes, giving him plenty of time to make his escape without having to worry about Tony being alerted straight away. He has no way to know he was successful except for the green blurb that popped up on his screen claiming the deed was done. It didn’t lessen the anxiousness in his stomach. What if JARVIS saw past the command?

He returned the computer to its proper place and hiked his backpack onto his shoulders once more and booked it towards the elevator. Once inside, he scrambled to grab ahold of the tranq gun hidden by his jacket because the guards stationed outside wouldn’t be letting him leave willingly.

His heartbeat rapidly in his chest in anticipation and he squeezed his eyes shut as he waited. This was big. There was no turning back from this. He was about to leave. He was about to leave Pepper and Peter and Tony.

He didn’t have much time to dwell on that before he heard the elevator ding to announce his imminent arrival. He opened his eyes and straightened his back. He saw the guards before he heard them. Then, as if on autopilot, he fired two shots, and both fell to the ground like ragdolls. He grit his teeth together at the sour taste left in his mouth and he exited the elevator. This was for the

best.

He snuck around the cars, knowing there wouldn't be just two guards down on the garage floor.

He had to take out three more before he found his window to escape. He bolted outside, into the sunlight, onto the busy sidewalk outside, and he didn't look back. He took a breath of fresh air and smiled despite the lonely ache in his chest at the thought of never seeing Pepper or Peter again. But he kept running anyway. He ran even though he knew he'd miss annoying Happy and Rhodey. And he forced one more breath through his lungs knowing Tony probably wouldn't even care that he left.

He ran because he knew if he stayed it would hurt worse than if he left.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys liked it so far! So sorry if the end was a little 'meh' I was just getting tired of writing and I really really wanted to get it out tonight. Anyways! Love y'all to pieces!

Also, I'd like to thank jwriter819 for giving me some awesome ideas! Thank you so much! It helped a lot!

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Tony's back in the car, breathing heavily and squeezing his eyes shut. The bullet was still lodged somewhere near his ribs and all the movement was irritating the hell out of it. "I-I need a steadier aim. I can't," he takes a large breath, "I can't aim hangin' out the window while we're swervin' everywhere." He shoots a pointed glare at Happy and the man responds that time with an irritated 'tsk' and a comment of "would you rather me *hit* the cars?"

Chapter Notes

I've been waiting a long time to write this chapter! I love it so much! Here comes some action! But boy it's definitely a long one. Hope y'all enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Sir Rhodes, if I may interrupt for a moment..." JARVIS interrupts politely.

Rhodey pauses, amid the instructions he's giving to the rally of troops standing patiently in front of him, and he addresses JARVIS by cocking his head to glance towards the nearest camera and quirking an inquisitive brow.

"Can't it wait JARVIS?" He sighed in exasperation. "I'm tryin' to organize a tactile support team for Tones before he gets in over his head and gets himself killed."

"Of course it can wait, sir, but I'd advise against it. Neither Mr. Stark nor Lady Stark would be pleased if the matter were postponed any longer."

Rhodey raises both his eyebrows at that and the 30 or so men and women at attention around him, perk up at the cryptic announcement as well. The room immediately quiets of any chatter that may have been taking place before. Everyone in the Tower was still on edge after the events that had transpired the day prior. It was hard to know who to trust and with every moment that passed that they couldn't identify the mole, the anticipation for a second attack grows.

"What is it then J?"

JARVIS doesn't hesitate another moment to announce the problem. "Master Keener vacated the premises exactly 45 minutes ago and he has yet to return."

A chorus of loud "what's" echo through the room. The uproar of panicked chatter is nearly enough to make Rhodey want to clamp his hands over his ears. The kid was definitely a hit around the Tower, despite what he seemed to tell himself... He was a part of the family. Everyone just tended to keep their distance... especially after what happened after Asher took his iconic teasing a bit too far.

“The kid just LEFT?” Asher shouts in a panic, his powerful voice ringing clearly through the commotion.

Rhodey goes stock-still, mouth open and eyes wide as he slowly processes. Tony was going to freak the hell out! “Shit,” he whispers, voice panicked and soft at the thought of the potential consequences of losing one of his Boss’ favorite kids, “shitshitshitshit.” His panic grows in droves and the noise around him was most definitely not helping him think clearly... perhaps this was all just a simple misunderstanding... He waves his hands in an insistent gesture for everyone to quiet down so he could concentrate on his next course of action. This needed to be taken care of ASAP. Tony would wring all their necks if the kid somehow got hurt while he was on their watch.

“I thought you were supposed to keep the kid from leaving JARVIS. And why are you informing me *now*, instead of 45 minutes ago when he actually left?!”

Rhodey didn’t think it was possible for an AI to sound so sheepish, but *heck*, it was *Tony Stark’s* AI, he shouldn’t be surprised.

“Well, he had originally requested to leave without me informing the Boss so he could pick up something special for Master Peter. I, of course, did not allow him because of Boss’ strict protocols, but he seemed very persistent. He made such an effort in manipulating my sensors and planning his escape that I decided to indulge him a while and refrained from informing anyone of his disappearance.” JARVIS paused to allow that to sink in. “He seemed to be having a rough time, and I thought a nice outing without the prospect of speaking directly to Mr. Stark would make him feel a bit better... perhaps a bit independent even. However, I did nothing to aid his escape. He did it on his own accord and in all honesty, his escape was quite impressive for an untrained child... but now I am beginning to worry for his wellbeing. He has been gone for a fair amount of time and I am unsure if I made the correct judgement call here.”

“Yeah, well no shit!” Asher growled once JARVIS was finished speaking. “You don’t just let a kid like that out on the streets alone.” The hefty man turns to look back at Rhodes, gaze steely. “Sir, should I gather a group to hunt him down?”

Rhodey presses a hand to his skull and shakes his head. “Just wait. I need to call the Boss, see what he wants us to do. We can’t leave the base that vulnerable. There’s still potential for Hydra to be-”

“The kid’s gonna get hurt!” Asher interrupts with a loud voice. “We can’t just stand around and wait for the Boss to make a decision.”

Rhodey settles the man with a scathing glare. “Don’t forget who makes the calls here Mr. McAllister. The kid can hold his own for a few more minutes. We don’t need to make any hasty decisions if he was simply running an innocent errand like he had told JARVIS.”

Voices of protest begin to rise from the crowd and Rhodey struggles to tamp it down. Apparently, the group was a bit more attached to the potato kid than he had predicted. “Hush. The kid will be fine; everything will be taken care of. Now go suit up.”

Reluctantly, the crowd disperses, and Rhodey refrains from howling in frustration. He’d pull out his hair if he had any... he couldn’t believe the kid would do something so reckless. Although, he supposes, the kid’s judgement was a bit clouded. Tony had given him quite the scare...

“JARVIS, fill Happy in on what’s goin’ on.”

“Mr. Hogan is in the penthouse helping Mrs. Stark fill Peter’s bath. Master Peter had made quite the mess of himself at breakfast.” Rhodey could hear the fondness in the AI’s voice as he trailed off. “Shall I inform Lady Stark of the predicament as well?”

It felt like a man had ripped out his lungs at the prospect of what Pepper might do to him if she found out he had lost one of her babies. Castrate him, perhaps? “No JARVIS!” He answers quickly. “Just um... don’t tell her. She’d go ballistic. Just... just tell Hap to meet me down here as soon as possible.” So, with that command and an involuntary shudder, Rhodey pulls out his phone and dials Tony’s cell, hoping he would pick up. He just prayed the kid didn’t get caught up in something stupid.

“Take the next exit,” Allen instructs from the backseat, holding his phone up at his eye level as he looks from the front windshield and back to the screen. Tony was driving and Sam was riding shotgun so his sore leg could stretch out. The entire ride had remained awkwardly silent apart from Allen’s terrible navigation skills making an appearance here and there. It was tense and uncomfortable and Tony looked to be extremely on edge if the way his hands were gripping the steering was anything to go off. From what Sam had heard, seen, and experienced himself, Stark was typically a witty, cheerful, no-nonsense sort of guy, and this new dark, brooding thing he had going on did not help his overall uneasiness with the issue at hand.

Eventually, Sam decided enough was enough because he’d always been a motormouth and he was sick and tired of this uncanny silence... he also wasn’t all for the fact that Stark looked damn near suicidal as he was driving them through heavy traffic at what seemed to be light speed. Sam preferred his chauffeurs to have a healthy regard for human life. He knew his hands were going to cramp later with the way he was gripping his seatbelt... he needed a distraction and perhaps Stark did too.

“So... what’s the plan?” Sam turned to stare at the side profile of the stiff man beside him. The dude didn’t so much as twitch a muscle. His mouth remained in a hardened frown and his eyes remained forcibly fixated in the direction of the road despite the distraught hollowness lingering behind them. Sam saw the man’s fingers twitch. “Stark?”

“I’m gonna take a look at this place. See if it’s even worth draggin’ guys out here... and trace of them may be long gone by now.”

“And if they’re not?” Sam questioned slowly. Again, the idea of rushing into a dispute against Hydra troops alongside a suicidal man wasn’t exactly his idea of fun and safe.

“Well,” Stark huffs and nods discreetly towards the glovebox. Sam glared at him and leaned forward to pop open the compartment. He really shouldn’t have been surprised when he was met with the sight of approximately 5 distinct types of guns and several boxes of high-tech tracer bullets, but *damn* .

“Right here, Boss.” Allen speaks up as they approach the exit.

“I know!” Tony roars in irritation. “I heard you the first time. I’m not deaf.” Then with that, the car lurches, and the tires squeal as he swerves to make the turn.

Sam refrains from saying anything more. Instead, he reaches forward and grabs one of the lightweight pistols. He’d never held one of Stark’s specialized guns before, they were ridiculously expensive and definitely had a high demand in the black market. He grins as he plays around with it, getting a feel for the fancy weapon... that is... until Stark spoke up again.

“Don’t get any funny ideas, Wilson.”

He looks up just in time to see Stark’s shiny revolver pointed at his face, propped up by the elbow of his extended right arm that had a firm hold on the wheel. Sam’s eyebrows raise and he slowly places the pistol back in the glovebox and shuts the compartment. He holds up his hands slightly and fixes Stark with a pointed stare. “Don’t be so paranoid, Stark. I’m not gonna shoot ya. At least not while you’re bookin’ it down the highway.”

Slowly, Tony’s head turns just a bit so he can glance at him. His frown doesn’t budge, but he does lift his left hand so he can tuck the revolver back where he had hidden it. Again, Sam is slightly taken aback by the man’s devoid expression and nonchalant manner. He assumes the threat of Hydra and his altercation with the kid had put him in a bit of a pissy mood; not that he blamed the guy in the least. He’d be in a pissy mood too if he’d been exposed so national television.

Sam decides to shut up before Stark decided to pull the trigger on him for being a nuisance or whatnot. So, the silence returns for another good ten minutes until the shrill sound of a phone ringing fills the deafening quiet. It startles Sam just a bit (he’d never admit it), but all it does is seem to piss Tony off even more. The car jerks to either side as the man grumbles and struggles to grab the phone tucked away in his front pocket.

He glances down at the screen and quickly swipes to answer. “What’s happenin’ Platypus? You got Nat and my guys ready?” He presses the device to his ear and feels a somewhat calm sense of serenity pass over him because Rhodey’s always got his back. He can trust Rhodey.

“Yes and no…” Rhodey’s voice is muffled and he sounds worried. Tony frowns, mind quickly being bombarded with worse-case-scenarios. Rhodey was typically very verbose with issues; something was wrong. *Had Hydra attacked the Tower? Did Pepper go into premature labor? Had one of the kids been kidnapped?*

“Well that was cryptic as hell. What’s going on?” Tony feels the short-lived serenity drip away and become quickly replaced with the all-too familiar sense of dread

“Harley’s gone.” Rhodey answers; simple and sweet.

The car jerks once more and several horns blare in a panicked frenzy when the Audi nearly swerves into them. “WHAT?? What do you mean he’s gone?”

Sam looks over at him with a worried crease between his brows and his lips downturned into a worried frown, but he doesn’t interrupt. He assumes they must be talking about the kid…

“JARVIS said he left 45 minutes ago. Apparently, he claimed he was just running out to grab Pete something, but he hasn’t come back yet.”

Tony growls into the phone, head whipping in every direction to get a figure of the surrounding traffic; the quickest escape route perhaps. “He’s not supposed to leave the Tower by himself. He’s gonna get hurt.”

“You don’t think I know that, Stark?!” Rhodey sounds panicky and for once Tony’s glad for the man’s proclivity towards dramatics and mother-henning. “I’m shittin’ myself just thinking about it.”

“How’d he even get out in the first place? JARVIS has specific protocols to prevent things like this from happening.”

“Why don’t you ask your good-ole AI about that? He let the kid go in the first place.”

Tony scowled, growing more and more frustrated at the coming influx of traffic. "I should have activated FRIDAY before I left. His coding must still be damaged after-" his panicked rambling is cut off by Rhodey's brisk "hang on". Tony could hear loud murmuring and the distinct sound of Rhodey's voice ordering for a discreet search party to be formed.

"Rhodes. Rhodey what's happenin' over there."

There was a pregnant pause and then Rhodey's voice is speaking in a strained whisper.

"Asher found- um. He went looking for how the kid escaped... he found 5 bodies in the garage-"

"What?" Tony's voice came out in a very unmanly squeak; throat instantly raw and dry. *How could the kid... why would he do something like that?*

"No! Not like that," Rhodey was quick to amend. "Kid knocked 'em out. He must have gotten his hands on a Freezer pistol or something. Not dead. No-um... but I think this means he ran. Like... planning on never coming back. He wouldn't have gone through all that trouble if he planned on coming back."

Tony's chest tightens and it feels like a hand had wrapped itself around his neck, and another had rose from the pit of his stomach and was clawing at the inside of his throat. "You-you said he was good. You talked to him... you told me he was doing fine!"

"I know- I know. I thought he was fine. He must have freaked or something. I don't know..."

"Alright-alright," Tony took a sharp inhale and closed his eyes for a moment to get his bearings. He had a good feeling of what this might be about, and he needed to try and fix it no matter how badly he wanted to just ignore the issue and pretend it never happened. But it did. And now his kid was out there in the streets of Manhattan; all alone, cold, and unprotected. "Here's what you're gonna do. I want you to send a group of guys to the location Allen's about to send to your phone. I want everyone else out looking for that kid, but *do not* engage. I-I-I need to be the one to talk to him first; I don't want to risk him running before I-I... before I can. I'm headed back, ETA 20 minutes-"

"But sir," Allen interrupted from the backseat, "we're at least an hour away. We're almost on site, it wouldn't be logical to turn around now. Why don't we go check the place out first, then turn around once they find him-?"

"Allen," Tony warned sharply through gritted teeth, "I swear to god if you say one more stupid thing I won't hesitate to reach back there and wring your neck with my bare hands. Send the coordinates to Rhodes." With that last instruction, Tony spins the wheel sharply, sending the tail of the car swerving in front of them as he makes the U-turn in the middle of oncoming traffic. The tires squeal sharply amongst the loud car horns going off around them, the engine revs and the specially modified Audi easily hits high speed as Tony begins weaving dangerously through the traffic, plowing through clear areas along the sidewalk.

"Tones don't be reckless," Rhodes instructs over the phone. "You can't help Harley if your dead."

Tony hangs up the call and tosses the device into Sam's lap. The man fumbles with the expensive phone before catching it safely in his hands. Tony doesn't look away from the road. "Call Captain Spangles." He instructs, narrowly missing another cars bumper when veered over the curb, onto the wide sidewalk to pass a line of parked cars.

"Uhh," Sam drawls, staring down at the screen, "who?"

“Steve Rogers. His contact name is Captain Spangles,” Tony huffed in exasperation, turning to look at him. “Do you not know how to work a phone?”

“I’ve been a hobo for three years, man. I don’t know how to work this futuristic shit.” Sam bellows, waving the phone around sporadically, panic budding as he sees cars zip by them. Tony takes a quick turn into an alley to detour onto a less busy road running parallel to them. He merges dangerously into more traffic with a grumble.

“My god,” he groans, throwing his head back. Here take the wheel.” He recklessly takes his hands off the steering, reaching his hands for the phone. Sam scrambles to steady the steering as Tony continues muttering to himself. “I knew I shouldn’t have severed JARVIS’ auxiliary connections.”

“Heck man, WHERE WE GOIN’?” Sam bellows in a panic. Tony glances up nonchalantly, as if he hadn’t just pushed down on the accelerator even more.

“Just go straight,” he responds, angling his head back down to scroll through his contacts. It doesn’t take but a few more seconds before he’s pressing the phone to his ear and taking back control of the wheel. The cell rings and Tony’s irritated grumbling continues.

Finally, he answers.

“Stark!” He sounds relieved. “I thought you were gonna keep blowing me off. We need to talk about what happened-”

“No time Rogers,” Tony growls, teeth pressed tightly together. “I need a police escort from Brooklyn to Manhattan stat.”

“Right now?”

“Yes! NOW! It’s an emergency. Send your closest squad car.”

“Okay-okay, calm down,” Steve placates over the phone. “What’s this about?”

“Long story short, Keener made a run for it while I was out. I need to find him and bring him back to the Tower before someone nabs him. Neither Hydra nor Oscorp are exactly pals with me right now. Now everyone knows he’s affiliated very closely with me and I don’t even wanna think about what danger he could get in. So, do me a favor and keep a lookout for a skinny kid with dirty blonde hair. And send me that damn escort!” He didn’t bother listening to the man’s response before hanging up.

There were only a few minutes more before the blaring horn of a squad car could be heard in the distance. It came hurtling from one of the back alleys, swerving into traffic a few cars in front of Tony’s Audi. Tony sped up that much more and navigated through the few cars between them and then he was really off, speeding down the road behind one of Brooklyn’s finest.

“Any word?” Tony asked breathlessly as he came jogging up beside Rhodey. He pulled the cap down over his face even further and fixed his cold stare on the man. The car he had just jumped out of was ran up over the curb of the sidewalk, parked quite recklessly with two men still seated in the vehicle just as he had instructed them.

“Nothing yet,” Rhodey spoke forlornly, rubbing his palms together nervously. He had a cap on too, jacket collar popped up to hide his face as best he could.

“How far have you fanned out?”

“I’ve got guys sent all over Manhattan. Nat’s leading a few in Queens. There’s been no sign of him yet. Maybe you should hook JARVIS back up to the security feeds and run facial recognition. He said you removed his access.”

Tony grimaced. “No can do. He’s still weeding out bugs. His firewalls are too unstable; the smallest probe into his coding can have his entire system collapsing. I can’t risk it.”

“FRIDAY then?”

Tony again shook his head, pressing both palms to either side of his face as he fought to figure a solution. “Her data processing isn’t advanced enough to handle all that information at once. It would overload her systems.”

“I’m guessing the others are the same?”

Tony nodded, and growled under his breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose. He hated not having a solution; he always had a solution...

He glanced around the street a couple miles out from the Tower and glances around at the random faces of pedestrians passing them by without a second glance. He racks his brain for anything.

“I-I-I’m not sure what to do. I might be able to um... to string them all together and have ‘em work collectively, but they’ve never operated together at the same time. I’m not... I’m not sure how well they would work together.”

“You talk about ‘em like they’re children. They’re computers Tony. They won’t plot against one another fighting for your attention.”

Tony scowled at him. “That’s exactly what they’re going to do Rhodey. Have you not been around when I have JOCASTA or TADASHI working under FRIDAY? Each of them things got a mind of their own.”

“Alright-alright, fine...” Rhodey’s nervous hand rubbing returns and he glances towards where Happy had just barreled his way out of the fifth corner store on that street, undeterred and heading straight for the next one with a determined crease between his brows.

Tony’s foot taps anxiously on the cemented sidewalk. Then he cranes his neck to look at the passengers still in his Audi. He stalked over and opened the driver door, peering in with a stern glare.

“Wilson, Allen, listen up. I need you to head back to the Tower. Head straight to the basement and call me when you get there. No lollygaggin’! Get goin’!” At his command, Allen rushed to exit the backseat. Tony steps away and allows him to get in the driver's seat, and moments later they were gone. Tony turns back to Rhodey.

“C’mon,” Tony growled out, stalking down the sidewalk, “let’s go find my kid.”

It takes another whole half hour of searching before someone finds him. After Tony talked Wilson and Allen through activating his prototype AI’s they were able to catch a potential glimpse of Harley in the Bronx through security feeds. How he had gotten there so quickly, Tony had no idea. It seemed nearly impossible really, so Rhodey had sent the nearest guys to check it out just to be sure. Sure enough, they reported back after ten minutes, claiming the kid was all alone sitting in a dingy diner.

Tony’s heart leapt into his throat, and it only took Happy 15 minutes of reckless driving to make it

all the way across town.

“In there?” Tony asked, pointing towards the diner across the street from where Happy had parked in front of the finely dressed man and woman who had reported it in.

“Yes sir. We don’t believe he’s spotted us yet.”

Tony squints to try and see his kid, but the most he gets is a mop of blonde hair peeking over the shoulder of a large man sitting in the booth in front of him eating a large cheeseburger. “Alright,” Tony sighs, “you two get back to the Tower and help hold down the fort. Rhodey, Hap, stay here for a few, would ya?”

He didn’t wait for any confirmation from either party. He was too busy already dodging traffic as he crossed the busy street. He approached slowly, swallowing the nervous lump in his throat. He wasn’t sure how he should approach this confrontation. Hesitant, Sad, Angry, Relieved? He was feeling all these things, but none seemed quite right. For a second there he almost chickened out, but he knew getting the kid back safe was his top priority. He needed to put his insecurities and emotions to the side and bite the bullet. Even if the kid never forgave him... at least he’d still be safe.

He walked into the diner and lifted the cap from his head. He approached the booth Harley was sitting at, hunkered over, staring at the hands he had clasped atop the table. The corners of Tony’s mouth lifted into a relieved smile and the crushing pressure in his chest wisped away at the sight of him. He didn’t comment on the mangled hand the kid was sporting, or even the dark circles beneath his eyes and he took a seat down in the booth cushion across from him.

Harley’s head snapped up in a panic. He stares at Tony and over the course of a few seconds his face morphs from anger, to relief, to fear, then back to anger once more. Tony remains still as he watches the kid jump into action, grabbing his backpack and leaping from the booth to try and make a fruitless escape. All Tony has to do is grab his bicep and push him back into his seat.

“No more running,” he instructs firmly, watching Harley closely as the kid perches at the edge of the booth, watching him warily as if he wasn’t quite sure if Tony was going to attack him or not.

“Why-why are you here? How’d you find me?”

Tony sighs and rubs his eyes, balancing his elbow on the table and propping his head against his hand. He was just *so* tired.

“I was worried, kid. Had a whole search party goin’ and everything.”

Harley scowls at him.

“Why do you care? Why can’t you just leave me alone?” He stands from the seat once more and Tony’s nostrils flare in irritation at the outright display of disobedience. He grabs the kid’s arm once more and pushes him down with much more force than he inflicted the first time.

“Because you’re my kid. Now sit your ass down and look at me while I’m trying to have a conversation with you.”

Harley tears his arm out of Tony’s grip and glares. By that time, they grabbed the attention of a few nosey onlookers, but Tony couldn’t care less. His insecurities and fear was quickly overwhelming him and his body instinctively deflected the weakness and altered it into anger; lots of it.

“I’m not your kid, Stark. I’m your *prisoner*.”

“Don’t talk like that Harley. You know that’s not what this is.” Tony speaks firmly, eyes narrowing ever so slightly. He fights to keep the angry waver out of his voice, and he clasps onto his left wrist tightly.

“That’s exactly what this is,” Harley hissed. No tears fell. There was no remorse; no more trust. He had broken the kid’s trust. “You lied to me, and you manipulated me.”

“I didn’t mean to-”

“But you did.” Harley snapped before he could finish, grip tightening around the straps of his backpack.

Tony wants to apologize. He wants to beg for forgiveness. He wants to explain and explain until the kid understood, but he doesn’t know how to make him understand because there’s nothing to understand... he messed up. Plain and simple.

“I never manipulated you Harley.” He hangs his head and closes his eyes gently, massaging his hairline with the tips of his fingers.

Harley’s usually pale face is quickly stained red. “But you lied,” he whispered in a hoarse voice. “You-you said you would forgive me.”

Tony felt his face heat up and a sting begin to form behind his eyes. “I know kiddo. I know. I’m sorry. I just-- I’m sorry.”

Harley stares at him, devoid of any anger. “I would never put them in danger y’know... you told me it was my job to protect them when you couldn’t... I-I would never--”

“I know you wouldn’t. I know.” Tony assures with a nod of his head. He’s still full of guilt for ever insinuating otherwise. He will probably remain that way for a long time.

Harley crossed his arms over his chest and looked away. “I think-- I think it’d be best if-if you leave me alone from now on.”

“I’m not gonna do that kid.” Tony argues, consternation riding up his throat.

Harley squeezes his eyes shut and growls. “Just leave me alone Tony. I can’t stand being around you.”

That one hurt. Tony felt it like a stab to the chest. All his fears are confirmed. The kid hated him. He wanted nothing more to do with him. He’ll never be forgiven for his mistake. He wished he could take it back. He wished to take it back so bad. Now, Pepper’s going to hate him. Peter’s going to hate him. No one is ever going to love him ever again.

“I can’t be around you and your family, because the more I am the more I want to be a part of it... and-and I just can’t do that to myself anymore, okay? I told you this wouldn’t work...”

Tony felt a strangled groan push against his throat, but he didn’t release it. “What about Pepper and Peter? At least say goodbye.”

“I can’t. I thought about it and-and I just can’t. I don’t think I could say goodbye...”

Tony turns his head in his palm and covers his eyes. He could feel his hot breath hit his wrist and he fought to control the obvious shudder as he exhaled. The kid wanted to leave because he thought he was too attached. Attachment was the first step to loss. The familiar concept has him

feeling all the more guilty. Tony knew the feeling all too well and it wasn't something any fourteen-year-old should even have to think about. This was all his fault. He shouldn't be getting so worked up over something like this. He'd only known the kid for a month.

Still... maybe he could convince him.

"Listen, kid, if this is about independence, then maybe we could work something out."

"No, it has nothing to do with that," Harley shakes his head emphatically, then he pauses. "Well... I mean. A little independence would be nice, obviously, but that's not my point. I don't want to hurt them."

"You won't."

Harley's eyes snapped to glare at him. "Well your opinion is irrelevant. Just yesterday you were so sure I-I had made the ultimate betrayal. I'm not gonna listen to any more of your lies." Then his head dropped to stare at the tiled floor and he muttered under his breath, "I shoulda known better than to trust Tony Stark." He looked back up at Tony. "You're no better than the rest of them."

"Fine!" Tony snapped, drawing a couple eyes in their direction at the somewhat loud outburst. *That* hurt. "Don't believe me. Heck, I wouldn't blame you if you never forgave me, but don't believe for a second that I'm gonna let you wander the streets on your own and risk getting yourself killed. You're a goddamned fourteen-year-old and you need someone to take care of you. End of story."

"I'll be fine. I can take care of myself. Now get out of my way." Harley snapped back, pulling his bag tightly over his shoulders once more. He discreetly lowers his hand towards his lap and Tony doesn't register the potential threat that single gesture insinuates until he sees the muzzle of a tranquilizer gun propped itself on the edge of the table, pointed directly at his chest.

His eyes widen as he stares down at it; then back at Harley. His eyes narrow slightly once the initial shock wears off. "Oh, and that's another thing. I thought I told you not to touch my guns."

"You did," Harley grins cheekily, showing off his pearly whites. "But I don't work for you anymore. I quit." He stands, keeping the harmless pistol pointed at Tony, hiding it from onlookers by tucking it close to hide it with the fabric of his jacket.

Tony hates the picture of Harley holding anything resembling a gun in his hands. It's painting a picture of a memory that's all too familiar. "Sorry kid, but I'm not letting you leave." He grabs the kid's arm. "It's not safe. You need someone that can protect you, and I know you can't trust my word right now, but I know you can trust that I'd never let anyone lay a hand on you."

Harley scoffed at him and tugged away. He glanced out the window beside their booth and rolled his eyes. "I'm perfectly capable. You might think I'm some helpless little orphan, but I'm fine. Goons have been trailing me and my taxi the whole way here, but I lost 'em easy. You can't say--"

Tony stiffened instantly. "Someone followed you?"

Harley waved it off. "Yeah, so what? I lost 'em, like, as soon as I rounded a corner. They didn't even look all that dangerous."

Before Harley could so much as blink, Tony had a strong hand around his wrist. The pistol was twisted out of his grip and he released it with a small yelp. Then, Tony tugged him into the booth beside him, tucking him close to his side and keeping the strong grip on his arm. Harley tugged, but he didn't let go. Then, that's when Harley actually looked up at him. He saw a strange look in the man's eyes as he slowly surveyed their surroundings: inside and out.

“Tony, it’s fine. Stop being so paranoid.”

“Don’t tell me not to be paranoid, kid.” Tony muttered, squinting at something outside the window, across the street. Harley stares too, eyebrows furrowing in amused exasperation as he tries to pick out whatever it was that caught the older man’s avid attention.

The next few seconds are fuzzy for Harley. One moment he hears Tony mutter a panicked ‘shit’ under his breath as the sound of shattering glass and loud screams fill the once quiet and peaceful atmosphere, and the next, he’s lying on the ground with Tony’s weight on top of him while bullets rain down on the seats they were just occupying. Stuffing and splinters of wood flew everywhere as tiny holes ripped through the booth cushions and table.

Tony tugs Harley so they’re barricaded by the hardwood of the booth and table, still lying chest to chest as he removes his own revolver from its hiding place in his jacket. His head swivels slowly, eyes narrowed like a cat on the prowl, and soon he’s rolling off of Harley while barking orders to the panicking patrons in the diner.

“Clear out! Everyone get outta here!” Harley makes a move to leave too, but Tony pushes him back to the ground with a strong shove and a finger in his face. “You,” he growls, “stay right there where I can see you. Don’t move till I tell you it’s safe.” Then with that, Tony’s propping his two hands against the edge of the table, gun balanced perfectly as his head peeks over the side to find his target. Loud shots ring out as Tony releases a few rounds, but then more bullets come raining into the eatery, shattering more windows and absolutely demolishing the cushions, stuffing flying everywhere. Tony shields Harley’s body from the flying debris with his own, holding up his own weight with his forearms braced on either side of the kid’s head.

“Tony!” Tony hears Rhodey’s panicked voice, and he turns to see his friend approach them in a crouch as he shoots at the roof where he can see three men scrambling to gather their things.

“Rhodes. The kid said he was being followed. We need to find out by who and eliminate the threat before it gets out of hand.”

Rhodey nods stiffly. “On it. C’mon kid.” He reaches to help Tony pull the kid up. Another round of bullets splinter into the wood of the table. Harley winces. All three crouch against the side of the booths.

As soon as the firing stopped, Tony quickly stood to his feet.

“Tony no!” Harley shouts, diving to grab him and pull him back down just as the man fires his last three rounds. Harley turns to look where he had been aiming and just barely catches a glimpse of two of the three men falling to the ground on the roof they were perched on.

“Alright, let’s go.” Tony grabs Harley’s hand and tugs him along beside him. Then he hands the kid off to Rhodey and takes one last look around to make sure no one had been injured. He spots the kitchen staff and workers cowering behind the counters. He smiles at them politely. “I apologize for the mess. I’ll have someone contact you about compensation for your trouble.” Then with a quick salute he jogs out the diner to catch up with Rhodes and his kid.

Rhodey pushes the kid into the backseat, scrambling in behind him, and Tony runs around the front of the car to dive in the passenger’s side. Happy already has the car started and ready to book it out of there at Tony’s command. Tony collapses into the seat with a loud hiss, arm pressed firmly into his side, and he turns around to watch Rhodey checking the kid over.

“He good?” He questions with a slight rasp. The kid’s face was slightly cut up from the glass and

sharp wood, and Tony only hoped that was it.

Rhodey's hands skim over the boy's sides and he nods his head. "Yeah... he looks it. We can have Bruce check and make sure though," he releases a sharp breath and pulls the kid into a tight hug. "God kid you had me freaked." Tony feels a surge of jealousy spike through him, but it was quickly overridden by the sharp pain in his side. He muffled a pained growl in his throat and pulled his hand away to examine the blood pooling onto his white shirt. Not good.

"Shit, Boss. You got hit." Happy exclaims with wide, panicked eyes.

"Yeah, glad it was me though." He shot a playful look over his shoulder at the kid. "Don't think the squirt coulda handled it quite as graciously."

Harley scoots forward in the seat, looking genuinely worried. "You-you got hurt?"

Tony's playful smile dropped, and he was quick to reassure him. "Yeah, but it's not the end of the world. I've had much worse, kiddo. Don't worry."

"I'm sorry," Harley instantly apologized, completely ignoring what Tony had said. "It's my fault. If I hadn't run off, you wouldn't have gotten shot. I'm sorry."

"Hey, it's fine," Tony placates sternly. "I'm fine, don't be sorry. Just think of this as payback for the shit I did to you, yeah?"

Harley was just about to respond, mouth open and ready, but--

"SHIT!"

The side of the car is suddenly assaulted with an array of bullets. Large, web-like patterns spread across the windows from where the bullets pierced it after attempting to break through. Rhodey shoves Harley down so his forehead is pressed between his knees and both Tony and Happy snap to attention.

"Should I go after 'em Boss?" Happy questions breathlessly, staring out the windshield as the car gets farther and farther.

Tony looks between the disappearing car and Harley in the backseat, teeth grinding together and lips pursing tightly. "No, we gotta get the kid back safe--"

Harley, of course, immediately objects. "No! We gotta go after 'em! You said so yourself. C'mon, it's not like I'm gonna get hurt in here."

Tony bristles and replies sarcastically. "Yeah, that is until you're thrown through the windshield after they shoot out our tires and Happy goes throttling into another car."

"I'll wear my seatbelt," he says definitively, scooting back to buckle his belt to officiate the statement.

A low growl permeates in Tony's throat as he fights over what to do. If they didn't get going now, they could lose them and then Tony would never know who had been chasing after his kid, but then...-

"Boss?" Happy questions uneasily, fingers flexing on the steering wheel. "They're gettin' away. What're we doing?"

Tony takes one more glance into the backseat, making momentary eye contact with the kid and a shared look which holds so much more than words could express. He turns and sits properly in his seat, removing his revolver from his jacket pocket. "Step on it, Hap."

They book it over the hill as Tony quickly pushes more rounds into the emptied cylinder. Rhodey's in the backseat, unbuckled and lifting the floorboards to pick out an array of weapons from a hidden compartment. "Tones, want somethin' less old fashioned, maybe?" He asks, holding out one of the advanced Stark pistols with a tight grip around the barrel as they drive over a pretty nasty pothole.

Tony twists in his seat and instantly grabs for it.

Happy remains silent as he concentrates, both hands on the wheel and eyes fixated ahead.

Tony glances up and sees they're almost within range of the car speeding and weaving ahead of them. He snaps a full magazine into the pistol and pulls back the slide with a sharp click, angling it up so the muzzle is pointed at the roof of the car.

"Head down, kid," he instructs loudly as he pushes the button to roll down his window. "Things are 'bout to get pretty nasty."

With that statement, Harley watches as Tony leans part way out the car window and shoots at the car in front of them. The back-windshield shatters and people mulling down the sidewalk immediately scream in terror. Cars honk and tires squeal as drivers swerve away from the car chase in a panic. Tony's able to release three more rounds before he's ducking his head back into the car just as the sound of bullets ricocheting off metal ring out in retaliation. Harley tucks his head down on instinct at first, but then lifts it slightly and peeks out from behind the passenger seat, hands gripping either side of the smooth leather. He can see a man leaning out the shattered windshield with a black assault rifle propped up and pointed directly at them.

"Crap," Tony mutters under his breath. "These guys came prepared. Hap, try an' ride up next to 'em."

Happy grunts in acknowledgement and swerves around a puttering car as tiny cracks begin littering the front windshield as if only little rocks were disturbing it. The shooting stops, and then Tony was leaning out the car once more... and then so was Rhodey with his own badass rifle pressed against his shoulder.

A loud siren breaks through the chaos and Harley's eyes bug out as he scurries to take a look out the back windshield. Tony and Rhodey duck back inside and Harley reaches over to tug on Rhodey's jacket. "Uhh, guys..."

Both men turn to look and Happy curses when he spotted the red and blue lights flashing through his rearview. Harley turns to gauge Tony's reaction and the corner of the man's mouth quirks up into a smile.

Tony's phone buzzes in his pocket... he had a feeling on who it might be. "Keep goin' Hap," he instructs while he fishes out the device. He shakes his head in abject amusement. "Speak of the Devil. Take care of 'im kid." He tosses the device to Harley and the boy immediately clasped on and answered the call.

"Stark what the hell?! I know it's you--"

"Captain Rogers," Harley greets cheerfully. "Are you the one chasing us?"

As he speaks, Tony reloads his pistol.

“No,” Rogers responds with a bristly tone. “Are you in the car with them, kid?” His voice is stern and disapproving and Harley’s cheeky grin breaks out as he watches Tony hang out the side of the car once more.

“Uhhh, no?”

Steve released an exasperated sigh. “Put Stark on the line, kid.”

“No can do, he’s busy.”

“Doing what?”

Harley hums. “Sorry, that’s classified. Are you gonna make ‘em stop chasing us?”

“Kid, I can’t just call ‘em off when people can see Stark hanging out a window, shooting at a car. It doesn’t work like that. Tell whoever’s driving to pull over and stop before reinforcements are sent. If people see the police not reacting then--” Harley pulls the phone away from his ear and shouts over the noise.

“He said he’s not gonna call ‘em off.”

Tony sighs and sits back in his seat, wincing ever so slightly as he applies a little more pressure to the wound in his side. Happy swerves to the left to follow the car down a lonely street. “Course he’s not,” Tony groaned. He turned to look at Rhodey. “Rhodes?”

“Yep, got it.” Rhodey responds with a set jaw and steely eyes. He pulls out a folded-up sniper rifle from the hidden compartment in the floorboards and Harley’s eyes widen as he unfolds the heavy-duty machine. Harley watches as Rhodey turns to glance out the back windshield once more, then jab his elbow into the side door. Instantly, the glass begins to slowly retract with a soft hum, and he props up the gun against the back hood of the car. “Stay down kid.”

Things continued to escalate like this for several minutes. Rhodey had shot out the tires of almost 5 squad cars, but more and more were still showing up.

Tony ducked back into the cabin of the car, out of breath and in pain. “Can you drive *any* slower?” He retorts sarcastically, shooting Happy a sardonic glare. Happy doesn’t respond to the jab and Tony’s back out the window, propping his elbow up against the window ledge to try for a steadier aim. Rhodey knocks out the tires of the latest cruiser and he sits back on his haunches to take a break before the next one shows up.

Harley’s heart is pumping from the chaos and his fingers are itching to help, but he’s probably already on thin ice with Tony and he doesn’t want to risk the man making them turn around because Harley was needlessly putting himself in danger.

Tony’s back in the car, breathing heavily and squeezing his eyes shut. The bullet was still lodged somewhere near his ribs and all the movement was irritating the hell out of it. “I-I need a steadier aim. I can’t,” he takes a large breath, “I can’t aim hangin’ out the window while we’re swervin’ everywhere.” He shoots a pointed glare at Happy and the man responds that time with an irritated ‘tsk’ and a comment of “would you rather me *hit* the cars?”.

“Tones, I’ll cover you while you get a good position,” Rhodey suggests, reaching to grab his rifle from earlier, but he pauses when he hears another siren. “Or maybe not...”

Harley sees his chance.

“I can take out the tires,” he offers confidently, already reaching for the release for his seatbelt.

“Absolutely not,” Tony growls at the same time Rhodey exclaims “Perfect-- oh c’mon Tony. The kid will be fine.”

“Yeah, Tony. I’ll be fine,” Harley chimes in, making grabby hands for the fancy rifle propped up against the backseats.

Tony snaps at him. “You. Zip it. You aren’t touching that thing, you understand?”

“Boss,” Happy interrupts, “hate to argue with ya, but we’re running out of options.”

Harley locks eyes with Tony. “It’s not like I’ll be hurting anyone. I’ll just be knockin’ out some tires... you can trust me, y’know.”

“Don’t start guiltin’ me into this,” Tony trails off, jaw setting into a disapproving frown. “Do you even... y’know what? Fine! It’s better than you hangin’ out the window.”

Harley grins and unbuckled his seatbelt. He sat up on his knees and grabbed hold of the rifle. Rhodey was hanging out the window while Tony snapped in another clip into pistol while slowly walking Harley through operating the advanced weapon. “Be careful,” he emphasized with a pointed look as he pushed something into his ear, “that’s a dangerous weapon. If you need help, tug on Rhodey.”

Harley gave him a thumbs up and settled his cheek against the cold metal to peer out the scope. Tony found himself smiling slightly at the sight of the kid. He hated it, but it felt nice to share his world with the boy too.

“Alright, Hap,” he clapped his hand, “get me close.” With that, he tucked the pistol into the waistband of his pants and used both hands to grip the top ledge of the window, fingers skimming against the cold metal of the car roof. He hoisted himself up with a pained grunt, so he was perched on the window ledge. Rhodes kept his aim on the guy in the backseat as Tony pulled the pistol from his waistband and took steady aim for one of the back tires. He took a deep breath, aimed.... And fired just as Happy hit another pothole.

“Godamnit Hogan,” Tony cursed. Then he heard a tire bust, but it wasn’t the one he’d been aiming for. He turned just in time to see the police cruiser that had been tailing them swerve to the right, straight into a parked car along the sidewalk. He thought he could hear the kid celebrating too, which made him smile. He felt something akin to pride bubble up in his chest... his kid had a damn good aim.

Inside the cabin, Harley hollered in excitement as he watched one of the police officers riding shotgun throw a tantrum and flip him the bird as they rammed into a parked car. He turned around to see Happy’s grin in the rearview and he smiled back. He then notices Tony’s body perched precariously on the passenger side door. “Uhh, is that even safe?”

Happy shakes his head. “Nope. Not one bit.” He didn’t seem so worried, so Harley tried not to be either.

“Try to keep her a bit steadier Hap.”

Harley jolted at the sound of Tony’s voice coming through the speakers and Happy laughed at his surprise then pointed towards his ear.

“He’s got an earpiece in. Just in case he takes a dive out the window and has to yell at us, y’know.”

“Has that... has that happened before?” Harley had a feeling he wouldn’t like the answer. For some reason, the idea of his mentor, slash Boss, slash kinda-sorta father-figure, bailing out of a car going close to 60 or 70 miles an hour didn’t appeal to him so much.

“Yep. Plenty of times.”

Harley doesn’t say anything else. He keeps one eye on the road passing behind them and one eye on the car in front of them. Tony was able to grab one of their tires just before they took a sharp right turn onto a less busy street. Harley thinks one more should do it... because these guys were ridiculously good at the whole ‘evading’ thing.

Then, the next thing he knows, Harley sees a third guy lean out the passenger side window, gun aimed and ready. The warning shout drowns in his throat as he watches in slow motion as the grizzly-like man shoots and then watches as Tony’s entire body jerks back. His pistol falls first and then the man himself is losing his balance and making a last-minute lunge out the window so he isn’t ran over by his own Audi’s tires.

Harley shouts as he watches Tony’s form roll along the curb and sidewalk then crumple like a limp ragdoll. Happy hits the brakes and Rhodey’s shouting at him.

“Tony!” Harley shouts in a panic, yanking the door handle and throwing himself against it, but it doesn’t budge.

“Go!”

Tony’s voice was quiet and firm over the car speakers as he coughed out the command. Harley can see his form, yards behind them, as he struggles to push himself up.

Happy begins to step on the accelerator, ready to continue the chase, but Harley’s eyes blow wide and he throws himself against the door. “No! Don’t go! He’s been shot!”

“Calm down, kid. He’ll be fine,” Rhodey placates, placing a hand on his shoulder, but Harley can tell the man didn’t quite believe the statement either.

Harley stares at him. Then, Rhodey’s eyebrows furrow as he watches the kid’s fear and uncertainty morph into determination. “And I’ll be fine too. Keep going.” Then with that, he fumbles with the lock behind him, thrown open the car door and bails. He rolls a bit as he skids across the hard ground, knocking the wind clean out of him, and he’s instantly grateful that they had barely hit 35 mph.

“Kid!” Rhodey hangs out the window, mouth agape, staring straight at him. Harley waves him off with a pained cough and watches as the car disappears over the hill. He rolls slightly as he turns his head to look over at Tony... he wasn’t moving all that much.

Harley scrambles to his feet, stumbling and wincing the several yards it took to get to Tony. He falls to his knees next to the man, bracing his ungraceful fall against the man’s back as he scrambles to roll his body over.

“TonyTonyTonyTony,” he stutters, shaking the man violently. “Wake up.”

Harley glances around at the very few people lingering around either side of the street, watching with wide eyes as if they couldn’t quite believe what they had just witnessed. They all looked panicked, but, yet, nobody had offered to help yet.

“Tony,” Harley shook him once more and the man answered him with a pained groan.

“Kid, what the hell?” He rasped.

Harley released a breath of relief, his tense muscles loosening as he draped himself over the man’s torso.

“Wha’re you doin’ here?” Tony groaned before he broke out into a nasty coughing fit. Harley helped him sit up, legs outstretched into the street, backside perched up on the curb.

“I’m helping you.” Harley answered, eyeing the blooming stain of dark blood seeping out from the jacket at the man’s shoulder. Harley quickly tore off his hoodie, then scrambled to peel off the lightweight flannel shirt he was wearing beneath it, leaving him in a plain undershirt.

“You hurt?” Tony grouched once he finished coughing. He did a quick glance over Harley and the boy scowled at him.

“I’m fine,” he spat.

Tony frowned at him and grabbed his face with the hand not belonging to his injured shoulder. He grazed his large thumb over something on Harley’s forehead, and the boy winced, pulling away instantly once he felt the sharp sting and the throb of pain following it. He hadn’t even realized he had bumped his head.... Wow, that hurt.

“You’re hurt,” Tony growled in irritation, quickly growing cognizant of his surroundings despite the worrying amount of blood he’d already lost. “Why the hell did you think it’d be a good idea to jump out of a moving vehicle?”

“You were hurt,” Harley snapped at him, reaching to try and press his flannel onto the wound of Tony’s shoulder, but the man moved away.

“That’s no excuse. I’m a grown ass man, and I can take care of myself. Now, you’re out in the open and in danger.” He snatched the loose fabric from the kid’s hands and flapped it out so he could grab ahold of one of the sleeves. Harley sat back on his haunches and glowered as he watched the man tear the sleeve of his shirt with his teeth.

Harley didn’t even know how the dude was functioning. His face was covered in scrapes and scratches, blood was oozing from his mouth and his nose, and it was dripping from his hairline too. Harley had what? A few bruises, and he already felt like shit.

Tony fumbled as he shredded his ruined jacket, then struggled a bit more as he fought to tie the fabric around his arm in a tight knot with the aid of his teeth.

Harley thought he was going to be sick at the sight of him. Blood seeping from his left side, and his right arm... Two bullets... his fault...

“I’m sorry,” Harley hung his head in shame. He didn’t mean for all this to happen... he had been trying to avoid things like this by running away, but apparently that didn’t help.

“Don’t be sorry, kid. This all comes with the job.” Tony winces again as he presses the remaining fabric of Harley’s shirt to his other wound. By then, a semi large crowd had gathered a few yards away, phones out, cameras flashing.

“These goddamn nosey people,” Tony grumbled as he struggled to his feet. “Don’t know what privacy means anymore.” A low guttural growl of pain rumbled through his chest and he nearly

crumbled to the ground. “Crap. Knees busted...”

Harley quickly wraps a supportive arm around the man’s waist before he topples over, being careful of his injuries as he tries to support at least some of his weight. Tony guides him so their backs are turned to the crowd and he presses a finger to his ear. “Keep on ‘em Rhodes. I either want a name or a head by the end of the day. And send a car for us once you find the time.”

“Who do you think those guys worked for?” Harley questioned as he adjusted his shoulder, so it wasn’t pressing so harshly into the area beneath Tony’s armpit.

“Don’t know,” Tony mutters. “If they’re Hydra or Oscorp I might be able to use ‘em, if not... I just like knowing who takes shots at my people, y’know.” He squeezes Harley’s shoulder gently and together they take a few steps forward so they could take a seat at a nearby bench. Tony collapses onto it heavily, and Harley takes a seat beside him.

Several minutes pass, the crowd somewhat disperses, and people passing by giving them a few weird looks, but overall, the time spent sitting on that bench was fairly uneventful.

“I really am sorry,” Tony rasps after a good ten minutes, eyes closed, and head thrown back to rest against the brick wall behind them. “I wasn’t... I wasn’t in the right frame of mind. I-I was desperate for an answer and for some reason the way the clues had all connected had my brain leading it all back to you... you were just... you’re too good to be true kid.” Tony’s head rolls to the side and his eyes open a sliver so he can look at the kid sitting next to him. “Just like you said before... bad people don’t deserve good things. People like me-- like us... we’re broken.” At that statement alone, Harley turns away and fixes his gaze on his lap, kneading his hands together tightly, and Tony pauses to lift his bloody hand and cover them with his larger one. “But sometimes... two broken people can find each other and help make things alright again.”

“You’re just full of cheesy Tumblr quotes aren’t ya?” Harley whispered with a wet laugh.

“Yeah, but I’m okay with it,” Tony grinned at him. “I’m kinda suffering of extreme blood loss right now, so I think I got an excuse to be all mushy gushy, don’t ya think?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Hmm, thought so,” Tony hummed, tilting his head back to its original position and closing his eyes once more. “Anyways... I just wanted you to know that I do trust you... too much actually... and I think that’s why I had thought it was you. It always ends up being the one I least expect... always.” He coughs, loud and wet, grip on Harley’s hand loosening ever so slightly as he whispered under his breath. “Shit, mighta broke a few ribs too.”

Harley untwines his hands and grabs ahold of the older man’s, squeezing tightly. “Yeah... I think I have that problem too.”

Tony’s head snaps up instantly to stare at him in worry. “Your ribs? You said you were--”

Harley laughs, loud and genuine as he rolls his eyes. “No, old man. The other thing.”

“Oh,” Tony whispers, tense muscles loosening as he settles back into the semi-comfortable position from earlier. “I getcha.”

The silence returns, and the world continues spinning.

Tony finds himself slowly slipping off to sleep and he fights to stay awake. He needed to stay awake in case there was danger; in case he needed to protect Harley... also, just in case he had a

concussion too. It would be the absolute worst time to fall into a coma. Too much to do.

He felt Harley shift ever so slightly beside him and he doesn't think much of it, simply squeezed the boy's hand a little tighter.

"You're gonna be okay, right?" Harley whispered.

Tony hummed. "I'll be fine kiddo. I've survived much worse."

"You aren't going to try again, are you?" The voice is so small and vulnerable...and Tony instantly knows what's implied. He squeezes his eyes shut and pushes away the panic.

"Not while I still have something to lose." He whispers softly in answer.

Then Tony felt a small weight fall gently onto his shoulder. A featherlight touch that barely disturbs the injuries a few inches below it. Then he feels a wisp of hair tickle the exposed skin of his neck and he feels warmth seep through his shirt. He rotates his head slightly and opens his eyes to see the kid tentatively leaning against him; his actions unsure and contemplative.

Tony smiles to himself and squeezes their hands before turning his head even more and pressing his nose into the teens hair, allowing himself to revel in his new, soft pillow.

"You still shouldn't trust me y'know," Harley whispers. Tony's about to object, but the kid's teasing tone that follows shuts him up. "I tell Pepper *everything*."

It takes a moment for it to sink in, but then Tony's belly fills with a joyful mirth and the pain and panic drips away ever so slightly as he allows the low rumble of a laugh to vibrate through his chest. He nuzzles further into the boy's hair and noses at a pesky hair tickling his chin. "Shoulda known... I knew you two were too chummy."

Harley giggles and presses ever so slightly closer, dropping his head to rest on the man's shoulder as he allows his eyes to slip closed.

"Yeah... I steal the good chocolates in your secret drawer too."

"Yeah, well, jokes on you. I stole those from Rhodey."

Harley snorts.

"We're quite the pair, huh, kid?"

"Yeah. We make a pretty good team I think."

"Mhm," Tony hums. "Even better I bet when your old enough to shoot. You gotta pretty good aim already, but I'll teach ya all the tricks of the trade; all the Stark secrets... we'll be unstoppable."

Harley smiles at the thought. "Just wait till Pete grows up... We could take over the world."

"Oh yes," Tony agrees. "With Pepper's guidance and Morgan's inevitable stubbornness, this world will bow at our feet... Get some rest now kiddo. I can tell you haven't slept. I'll keep the boogie man away."

"I know," the boy sighed. "Night Tony."

"Night kiddo."

Chapter End Notes

I don't know about you, but I am really really starting to dig Harley and Tony's relationship. It does remind me a lot about teen Peter and Tony's relationship (probably cuz I already write that so much that it sorta rubs off here too), but I try my best to keep it a little different. Sometimes I get the vibe that some people aren't as invested in Harley as they are in Peter, so I apologize for focusing so much on Harley lately (except I kinda don't cuz I love it so much), but his backstory is so fun and his personality is so complicated and interesting to write and also it's easier to integrate him into the whole mob plotline because he's a teenager and knows at least a little bit of what's going on around him.

Anyways, I apologize for the lack of Pepper and Peter this chapter. I wanted to fit them in, but goodness the chapter was already soooo long. And now that we've got these two's relationship ^^ on the mend, we can move onto Tony getting Peter and Pepper's forgiveness. So stay tuned for next chapter if you wanna see that I guess. Also, I know I haven't been including Nat a lot and I'm hoping to change that fairly soon.

Anywho, I love hearing from you guys. It's my favorite thing. Let me know what you think please, especially about this relationship between Tony and Harley. It really is such a fragile thing and I don't wanna push it or make it seem to OOC, so please call me out if it seems like that at any point.

Love y'all to pieces! MWAH! thanks for reading

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait guys. As you know... life tends to be a pain sometimes.

But yeah... this chapter definitely gave me some trouble. It's a long one for sure... but yeah. Hope you like it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pepper was wide awake through a majority of the night, cradling a sleeping Peter close to her side as she zoned out, staring through the window across the room at the bright and busy night skyline of New York. Despite her best efforts to take a much-needed rest, all she could think of were the crazy events that went down that day. She could still picture the broken guise Tony wore when Harley stormed from the room and while she retreated with a hysterical Peter in her arms only hours later as well. For a moment there she had felt genuinely worried about his wellbeing, but when Peter seemed to only continue growing more frantic she got distracted and her attention diverted from worrying about Tony to calming her child down. She focused on rocking him through the night, trying desperately to coax him into believing that everything was going to be okay... that Tony would never hurt her or Harley, but no words could comfort Peter's distressed wails and insistent denials. He remained glued to her side the entire night, hugging her tightly like he was afraid if he let go, she would never return.

The fact that Peter had jumped to the conclusion he had so quickly, only brought forth reminders of the boy's past traumas. Pepper hated the idea that her and Tony's arguments could be paralleled so closely to the night Peter had watched Richard murder his mother in cold blood. It made Pepper's blood broil and her skin itch with an icy sting as she fought to quell the added abundance of hatred she felt for that man.

Peter thought Tony was going to kill her...

Like his father had killed his mother.

He thought she was in danger.

Like his mother had been in danger.

How was she supposed to fix this mess she's made?

The instant she thought it, she felt guilt. It was her fault... Tony had only been doing what he thought was necessary to keep her and their family safe, which is his *job*, and her fraught protests had only seemed to spur Peter's uncertainty and panic. Tony had made a mistake; a terrible one, but it was part of Pepper's *job* to forgive him and help reason with him when he made mistakes. He was a man of honor and pride and justice. He could handle himself fine, but Pepper knew he sometimes tried to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders just so others wouldn't have to. He carried guilt with him constantly. He was scared. He was confused... and Pepper had shown no mercy to his desperate pleas for comfort and forgiveness for the mistakes he had already punished himself for.

Rhodey had explained it to her; Tony regretted what he did. He had been overwhelmed by the stress he'd been boxing away, and he lashed out after a poorly convenient trail of proof pointing towards Harley's doing. He had been acting out of an instinct to *protect* and *fix*... and then after he realized his mistake and wallowed in his own self-hatred in the only way he knew how... then he came to *her* for forgiveness... and she had turned him away.

He was drunk, sure... He had made another mistake. But his drunkenness alone should have been indication enough that he was struggling to stay afloat.

And now that she had time to think back, worry and remorse slowly spread through her, and she couldn't seem to help it when her traitorous mind wandered into a dark place, embracing a scenario where her husband didn't come back home. Pepper pressed a hand to her mouth to hold back a choked sob. She turned her head to press her cheek closer to Peter's hair and focused on the soft tickle of his brown locks against her sensitive skin.

Tony had been in distress and she turned him away because she was scared and angry. It had been a cowardly move and she hated being a coward.

So, that night she fell asleep with a mountain of guilt lying on her chest, knowing the next few days were going to be *hard* and she tried her best not to think about it.

Her stress levels had already spiked into the dangerous no-no zone Tony had been adamantly trying to keep her away from since she's become pregnant, and she can only hope things wouldn't continue to worsen as the days continued. Everything that could have possibly gone wrong had already happened. Both she and Tony had been blind to the repercussions of their actions. Trying to start a family in their line of work, in their name, in the world they live in... it's selfish and irrational and could have disastrous consequences. They had known this... yet she still pushed for that family.

And with children that didn't even technically belong to them? *How absurd was that?*

In the most lament of terms... they had quite literally kidnapped both Peter and Harley. Was she really that desperate for children? Were her hormones so out of whack that she had to kidnap children that didn't even belong to her and claim them as her own while her husband beat their real parents to death?

Heck, she shouldn't need any more convincing that this was all a very messed up situation... a very bad idea... And now her few day's worth of domesticity had been torn apart and quite literally broke her heart in two. The culmination of the mornings attack, the official defacing of Tony and the company because of his clear affiliation with two missing children, Tony's accusations against Harley, and Peter's growing hatred for him should be enough for her to realize that it wasn't worth it...

but it was... it really, really was. If there was any possible way to fix it, she'd give up her entire fortune for the chance to live a normal life with her husband, friends, and children out in the country, in a small town, with a cozy home, and a pet dog to tie it all together. She knows she'd miss her life. She'd miss the thrill of manipulation and thievery... but this... she nuzzled her cheek against Peter's soft hair once more, imagining Tony cuddled up on Peter's other side, arm slung around her waist, chin propped up on the top of her head, pressed close so Peter was comfortably sandwiched between them as he regaled them both with an exaggerated story about his day... it felt far more important than any stolen art piece she's ever had.

The family dynamic she and Tony had formed with the two boys had barely been functioning except for a few days, but it felt so right. Harley was a natural in everything he learned (except for

fighting, or so Happy claimed), and he reminded her more of Tony with every passing day: A caring, merciful young man hidden beneath a mask of anger and a need to prove his worth, a strong sense of wit, cockiness, and hard-headedness when the situation called for it... and of course all the times it didn't... and she sees a lot of Tony in Peter too. The boy had a curiosity to rival anyone's she's ever met, and he was sharp as a tack too. He wasn't tentative to share his opinions, and his straightforward no-nonsense sense of morality was something she had been surprised to see so prominently in a four-year-old child.

She could even picture Peter growing up in their little world, picking up her and Tony's mantle alongside Harley and Morgan. She hates to say it or even think about it, but she could already tell Peter would be a natural leader; more so than Harley. She sees too much of herself in Harley for him to grow up and strive for anything more than working behind the scenes. He's a sneak; always will be, and he'd be perfect to curb Peter's Tony-like boisterousness and recklessness...

No wonder it was so easy to slip into the idea that they could have been a real family.

It's just that everything had been developing at such a quick pace that Pepper had started to really see their future carrying on with those two as part of their family. It felt right, like this is what it was supposed to end up like all along. Heck, she'd already started damage-control by talking to SI's lawyers all morning trying to coordinate an excuse to explain to the courts why Peter and Harley were and should continue to remain in their care. But then shit had hit the fan and now everything was a mess once more.

She just hoped things hadn't been ruined beyond repair.

She woke up that morning next to a cranky Peter and sporting a sore back. Then Happy came up for a visit and Peter ended up throwing quite the tantrum after brunch when Happy tried giving him a bath. It would have been amusing probably if she hadn't already had such a splitting headache at the time.

She still had the headache.

Pepper was sitting in the Living Room by the time Happy had finished. He carried Peter into the room. The boy's arms were wound tightly around Happy's neck and as they got closer Pepper could see the big fat tears rolling down his reddened cheeks.

"He refused to even touch his toys. Think he missed Tony," Happy answered hoarsely, offering her a cheerless smile as he slowly deposited Peter into her open arms.

"No I don't!" The boy screamed loudly in protest before devolving into another bout of sobs and wails. "No I don't!"

"My mistake," Happy sighed, rubbing the boy's back gently and sharing a meaningful look with Pepper. It was easy to see that, yes, Peter did miss him... very much.

Happy didn't have a lot time to stick around after that. Pepper had tried convincing him to stay a bit longer, but the panicked look in his eyes and the offhand deflections he made to her inquiries had her suspecting something serious was really going on.

She didn't pry. She decided that it was best she probably didn't know so her anxiety wouldn't spike any further. So, she let him go. But by the time an hour had passed and there had been no word from anyone... she began to grow a bit... *nervous* didn't seem like the right word. JARVIS had told her that nobody except a few well-trained soldiers and the usual SI workers were in the Tower. Tony, Harley, Rhodey, Happy, and Natasha were all gone; including Phil and his posse.

JARVIS wouldn't tell her anything else, though, leaving her completely in the dark.

She refused to let herself panic though. There was no reason for her to panic yet. It was a challenge to stay calm, but after years of doing what she does, she had learned not to just accept things at face value. There was obviously a reasonable explanation for the absence of half the inhabitants of the Tower and she's sure she will be filled in about the situation once it was necessary.

So, she decided to occupy herself with consoling Peter instead of focusing on things she couldn't fix. She could fix this... or at least she could try.

Tony staggered into the elevator with Harley nudged under his good arm, supporting most of his weight.

"You good, Boss?" Asher inquires, eyeing his injuries warily as he lingers to hold the elevator doors open. He had just picked them up from the street where Rhodes had told him to meet them and he was both glad to see the kid was okay and mildly disturbed that his Boss looked to be on the brink of keeling over.

"I'll be fine. Go 'way," Tony grunts. His words were slowly becoming more slurred and it was obvious the blood loss was really starting to get to him. He was quite literally coated in it and if Harley wasn't already so used to it, he would have probably passed out at the sight.

He waved the man off and Asher stepped away to allow the doors to close. Tony releases a long sigh and slumps against the cool metal siding of the large box. "JARVIS..." he croaks, eyelids drooping and eyes rolling to the back of his head, "get Bruce. Get... Bruce..."

"Tony? Tony?!" Harley shakes him roughly when he sees his eyes start slipping closed. "Tony no. You can't sleep, dude. Don't do that! Wake up-- wake up!" He reaches up to slap at the man's cheek repeatedly.

"Kid get your hand away from my face," Tony warned with a soft grunt. Harley quickly retracts his hand.

"Okay-okay, just... just don't pass out till I get you to the Med... bay or whatever the hell you call it. I can't carry your fat ass all the way there by myself."

"Nope," Tony grunts, "we're goin' to the penthouse. I'm not gonna lie around where everyone can watch me bleed out. I gotta room upstairs for when stuff like this happens." Then his nose wrinkles and he twists his neck to narrow his already drooping eyes at the kid. "And... and don't swear at me... And don't call me fat either." He sways just a bit. "Do y'know how hard it is to keep this type of body? Especially at my age? Damn hard is what it is." The arm around Harley's shoulders flops around in a vague gesture to his person. Harley rolls his eyes and hikes the man's arms around his shoulder once more to steady him.

The man is definitely verging on delirious if he wasn't already there... *and Harley had thought he couldn't get any more insane after that gag-worthy heart-to-heart while he was bleeding out on the bench.*

Before Tony could start spewing any more nonsense, the elevator dings to announce their imminent arrival and Harley tugs him to get him moving. He doesn't miss Tony's pained wince with every movement he makes, but together they stagger out into the foyer and Harley only struggles a little with the increasing amounts of weight Tony is pushing onto him.

"C'mon, old man," he grunts, "where 'm I taking you?"

Tony's chin nudges in the direction opposite the entrance to the Living Room and Harley turns to head that way, but they're interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Tony? Is that you?"

It was Pepper.

She rushed into the foyer, brows furrowed in worry and lower lip trembling ever so slightly with a hand extended towards them. She looked absolutely wrecked. "What-what happened?"

Harley's eyes grow wide in panic.

"Let's explain when I'm not about to pass out from blood loss, hm?" Tony suggested with a little bite to his tone. He trudges forward, forcing Harley to follow.

Harley keeps one eye on Pepper. He felt bad... she looked so tired. He took a moment to wonder if Peter was okay and then saw how Pepper looked back towards the Living room while she worried her bottom lip... Peter must be in there.

"I'm going...I'm going to put Peter down for his nap really quick. I'll-I'll be right there, alright Honey." She reaches out to stroke one of Tony's blood-coated cheeks softly. Tony leans into the touch with another tired droop of his eyelids. She brushes away some wetness beneath his eye with the pad of her thumb then lets go of him and turns away quickly so she could go take care of Peter.

Tony and Harley just barely make it through the doorway of the private medical room before Bruce is rushing up behind them, medical tools in hand and an uncharacteristic worry in his eyes. The man grabs Tony's injured arm to place it around his own shoulders to help Harley drag him into the room, but a strangled roar of pain escapes Tony's mouth. Bruce immediately drops the arm and notices the odd angle the arm is resting at. Tony doesn't say a word and bites his tongue as he limps his way towards the room. He definitely wasn't doing too hot.

Harley thinks that it must be the adrenaline wearing off now that he didn't have to worry about being vulnerable out in the open... he thinks... he's not a doctor, so who knows. All he knows is that Tony wasn't near this bad before they got in the car.

"Alright, Tony... just lean back... there you go." Bruce instructs softly, adjusting his limbs on the bed carefully so he was lying down comfortably. His eyes were closed, and his breath was coming in ragged spurts and Harley could only assume it was because he was in a lot of pain... *a lot*. Because he was Tony Stark; and Tony freaking Stark wasn't a pussy.

"He's-he's gonna be okay, right?" Harley questioned... he didn't know how many times he'd asked that question already.

And he hated worrying. It was literally the worst thing ever. This whole worrying thing was definitely a downside to hanging around people he actually liked.

"He'll be fine. He's just in a lot of pain right now." Bruce reaches over to grab scissors so he can cut away Tony's shirt which hid the two bullet wounds and the pant leg that hid the busted knee. Harley grazed a hand over his own abdomen gently and winced slightly when he felt a sharp sting in his shoulder and then his head, but he ignored the tiny discomforts and focused in on Bruce, who was already getting to work. But Tony's strong hand stilled the doctor's and Bruce stopped to stare down at him with an irritated scowl.

"You check on the kid first," Tony rasped, teeth gritted and bloody as his lips upturned in a pained grin and jutted his chin towards Harley, who instantly cursed for nursing his sores around such an

irrationally self-sacrificing man.

He should know better.

“Tony,” Bruce argued adamantly, “I have to get those bullets out before they get lodged any further. You’ve already lost too much blood--”

Tony’s grip on his hand silences him again, and he settles Bruce with the most menacing wide-eyed glare Harley had ever seen. He could practically see the steam pouring from his nose as he exhaled harshly. Bruce even seemed a bit taken aback by the look and he scuttles back a little way, but he didn’t drop the scissors.

“Another two minutes won’t kill me... If you lay a hand on me before you check that kid, I will break each of your fingers one at a time. Understand? He’s *hurt*.”

“Tony! Are you kidding me?!” Harley shouts angrily, storming forward so he was standing at the side of the bed. “*You’re* hurt. Stop being a self-sacrificing little shit! I’m fine.”

Tony’s gaze skirts over towards him and his wide-eyed glare narrows in reprimand. “Don’t curse at me, kid. You’re on thin ice.” He turns to look back at Bruce and nudges his head ever so slightly towards the kid standing beside him. “Check him.” He had definitely sobered up.

Bruce makes move to approach him and Harley scowls in frustration in a last-ditch attempt to call off this ridiculousness. “I’m telling Pepper on you.”

“Yeah?” Tony coughs roughly, “well I don’t give a shit.”

As if summoned by speaking her name alone, the woman herself storms in with a frantic look in her eyes and a shaky hand pressed against her protruding abdomen. She approaches Tony’s bed without a second glance to Bruce’s hasty and stiff checkup on Harley.

“Tony, Baby, what happened to you?” She grabbed his hand and petted down his sweat damp hair. Tony’s smile warmed at the sight of her and his eyes slipped closed with a tired hum, leaning into her hand.

“I love you so much, Pep.” He whispered quietly, turning his head so he could press a quick kiss to her palm.

She dropped her hand to cup the side of his face and tears fell from her reddened eyes. “I love you too, Tony...” she snuffles and chuckles under her breath, “why do you have to do this to yourself, hm? I’m starting to think you’re the one that needs to be locked up in this Tower.”

A goofy grin splits across his face. “You’d have to tie me down, Love.”

“I believe that could be arranged Mr. Stark... I know some people.”

At that moment, Bruce rushes back towards the bed, hair slightly ruffled and expression rattled. “I-I checked out the boy, Tony. He seems fine. Slight concussion, but that’ll go away fairly soon all on its own. There’s nothing-”

“Did you check his ribs,” Tony coughed, goofy grin replaced once more with his serious frown. “They already took some damage before. Just got the all clear yesterday...but they might still be weak. You checked, right? They mighta gotten hurt again when he fell.”

“I’m sure he’s fine Tony,” Bruce assured. Tony immediately hissed at him.

“He jumped out of a moving vehicle Banner!” Pepper gasped. “Don’t tell me he’s fine. Check him right.”

“You did what?!” Pepper immediately spun on her heel to settle her panicked eyes on the sheepish child standing idly behind her.

“I-I-- eep.” Harley was cut off when Bruce nearly barreled into him with wandering hands trailing down his sides and stomach.

“Tell me if something hurts.”

Nothing hurts! He knows he’s fine. He’s much more worried about Tony’s obviously worsening condition, and Bruce’s slight panic wasn’t helping him stay calm at all. He can see Tony watching Bruce work to make sure he didn’t skimp out on anything as he examined Harley.

Bruce finishes quickly and with Tony’s short nod of approval the man moves back towards the bedside to get his tools ready and to start setting up the IV line. Tony grabs for Pepper’s hand and he looks up at her.

“Is Pete doin’ okay?”

Pepper squeezes his hand gently. “He’s perfectly healthy,” she smiles.

Tony chuckles hoarsely. “Hmm, interesting qualifier you chose there, Honey.”

Pepper offers him a weak smile and shrugs her shoulders slightly. “Everything will turn out fine I’m sure. Now, I’m going to get Harley out of here, okay? I’m going to go ahead and order him some clothes and furniture online and once you’re getting better, I expect you to get around to clearing out that office of yours that you never use. I’m sure he doesn’t want to be sharing rooms with Peter for any longer than he has to. We-We also need to talk together to the legal team so we can set up some sort of legitimate guardianship. Then we’ll start talking about schools and-and I’ve been thinking about it and I think it’d be a good idea if we started looking into some child therapist. So--”

“Honey,” Tony interrupted with a loving smile, “you’re rambling. I’ll be fine; everything will be fine. Go on. This won’t be pretty; you won’t be missing a thing.”

So, Pepper leaves, grabbing ahold of Harley’s hand and dragging the reluctant boy out of the sterilized room.

Pepper let’s go of his hand as soon as they step into the large living room. It still looked pretty jacked up from the attack, but most of the debris had been cleared out and the only remnant of that morning were several holes pierced in the glass windows. Other than that, things looked perfectly normal. He could see the mess of blocks on the carpet in front of the TV and he smiles. He sees the crayons and paper on the coffee table and the Dr. Seuss books stacked next to it... it was nice to be in this environment again. One he wishes will become the familiar norm to him.

Pepper silently takes a seat on the couch and begins pulling clothes out of the wide white hamper sitting near her feet. She pulls out a pair of onesie pajamas and gently folds it, blinking her eyes rapidly as she tried to concentrate on making the proper folds. She’d been folding and refolding laundry all day to just give her *something* to do. And the fact that she was folding this same onesie again for the fifth time... it just reminded her of everything she’d been stressing about; everything was just going so wrong,

“Um... Pep?” Harley asks tentatively. “You okay?”

Pepper huffs and slaps the garment in her hands down onto her lap. She snaps her head up to look at Harley and purses her lips. “No, Harley. I am not okay,” she replies tersely. “My husband is hurt. That is not okay. Do you want to explain to me what happened?” Her tone is accusing, and her gaze is sharp when it settles on him.

Harley pales... he had yet to meet a side of Pepper that wasn't supportive and sweet and completely and utterly motherly. This Pepper was angry and hurt and scared. He feels his fingers tremble minutely at his side and he curls his blood coated hand around the sleeve of his hoodie... Pepper was going to be so mad at him. He ran away and then Tony got hurt trying to protect him... it was his fault.

His chin dropped to his chest as he built up the courage to admit what he had done. He's sure she already knew. Someone had to have told her by now. He hoped she would forgive him; he hoped she would understand so he wouldn't have to go back to sleeping in that sad little room downstairs. “I-It's my fault... I'm sorry...”

Pepper's steely gaze doesn't soften. “Tell me what happened Harley.”

There was no coaxing, no soft reassurance to urge him to speak the truth. No. This was a demand... and he couldn't help but quake under her gaze. This was worse than confronting Tony.

“I-I ran away an-and Tony came-”

“YOU WHAT?!”

Harley's eyes bugged out in panic... she didn't know...

“Harley Ben Keener.” Her steely eyes took a familiar form... a look Harley had seen befall across his mother's face many, many times. “Come here *right now*.”

He doesn't want to, but there was no way he's going to *not* listen to her. So, he takes another step toward her... then, before he can react, her hand is snapping out to grab ahold of his right ear and giving it a swift tug, so his face is in line with hers. She looks really, really pissed.

“You are *grounded*. Do you hear me? You know never to leave this Tower without Tony's okay and an escort. It is too dangerous, and you know better than that. I can't believe you! There is no excuse.”

Harley's head bobs up and down quickly. “Yes ma'am I understand... I-I was just bein' a baby... I promise not to do it again.”

As those words slowly sank in, Pepper's eyes finally began to soften. She releases her grip on his ear and gently pulls on his arm, so he was seated on the couch beside her. She slowly wrapped her arms around him, and he sunk into the embrace, shoulders quivering from the warm sensation of her familiar warm hug. Tears pricked at his eyes, but he refused to let them fall, and he melted into her, arms wrapping around her round waist to return the hug. It had barely been two days, but he missed this so much. It made his skin tingle and burn, and he felt *okay* again. It was like when he used to hug his mother. She had been just as good at giving hugs, but he hadn't appreciated it... he never genuinely appreciated the love and affection his mother showed him until he didn't have it anymore. And he swears he's never going to take advantage of it ever again.

“Tell me what happened, Honey.” He felt Pepper's cheek press against the top of his head, and he doesn't know *why*, but everything came spilling out. He told her *everything*. He told her about his mother; about talking to Rhodey; about that feeling of *Deja vu* deep in his stomach that just

wouldn't go away. He told her he ran because he was scared of hurting her and Peter; of being scared of losing another family. He had been scared of disappointing Tony. He told her how he plotted his escape, stole some cash, and taxied his way across New York. Then he told her how Tony came... how he apologized and tried to convince him to come back... how he had ended up getting shot while protecting him and how much guilt he felt for putting Tony in danger because of another one of his stupid mistakes.

Pepper just listened, humming in acknowledgment where it was appropriate and running her long, dainty fingers through the knots in his curly hair. He could tell she wasn't all that fond of finding out Tony hadn't dragged him straight back to the Tower, and instead let him tag along on a car chase, by the way her fingers tightened around tufts of his hair. But otherwise, she said nothing and just let him talk.

He didn't know how long he talked, but it must have been a while because by the time he finished his mouth was dry, his throat hurt, and he was so, so tired. Pepper slowly rearranged him, moving his head so it rested against her collar bone, and gestured for him to lift his legs across her lap. He hesitated a bit, but Pepper simply looped a couple fingers beneath the cuff of his jeans and guided them across her lap. One arm went around his shoulders and the other draped across his knees... and she rocked him.

The intimate hold shocked him for a moment, but the comforting back and forth motion, the sweet hum of her voice, and the soft tickling of her hair against his cheek had him collapsing into her. "I'm so sorry," he whispered softly.

"Don't be sorry," Pepper hummed. "... but you're still grounded."

Harley laughed at that and Pepper chuckled along with him. "From what? It's not like I was allowed to leave before anyway."

Pepper flicked his ear for his snark but answered him anyways. "Tony and I had been talking about getting you a phone and a laptop for school... so, I'll order them, and you won't be allowed to use them for two weeks, understand?"

Harley simply nodded, squeezing his eyes shut to stave off the tears again. He-he was being grounded... she cared... and that thought itself had him quaking in her arms. It was such an overwhelming revelation which he'd been obliviously clinging to since the day he met her.

"I-I'm gonna go to school again?" He hadn't been to school in a long time.

Pepper's hand lifted to card through his hair again. "Tony and I were discussing it before all the craziness happened. We thought it'd be good to help you get out of the Tower. There's still a lot that needs to be done before you can leave and be safe, but I think it would be good for you. We'll talk about options a bit more with Tony when he gets to feeling better. Does that sound like something you'd like?"

"Yeah," Harley rasped quietly. "Yeah, it really does."

"Good. So, I'm going to assume you and Tony have hashed out your differences?"

"I think so. I-I'm not sure... but I think we're pretty even... y'know... me gettin' him shot an all." He slowly begins to pull away. Um... how's Peter?"

Pepper gently pulls away from the embrace as well and Harley drops his feet from her lap. "Not very great... a few things happened when you weren't here. I'm not so sure how things he'll be

seeing Tony again.”

“Oh,” Harley scoots away a few inches and gazes down at his lap. Pepper nods as if she agreed with him and went back to folding the clothes. “Um, do you think I can talk to him about it? I-I think I might be able to help.”

Pepper slowly turned to look up at him and forced a small smile onto her face. She looked drained and tired. Then she looked over at the clock and sighed. “That would be great. I need to get him up from his nap anyway. Why don’t you go wake him up? I’m sure he’ll be so happy to see you.”

Harley shakes Peter’s shoulder gently. “Pete. Hey Peter. Time to get up Buddy.”

Peter stirs beneath the large blue comforter and Harley watches as the boy slowly blinks his eyes open and lazily rolls his head to the side to look at him. Harley finds himself grinning when Peter’s eyes meet his and the younger boy instantly jumps from the bed.

“Ha’ley!”

“Hey Pe--oomph!” Peter throws himself off the bed, straight into Harley’s arms. The boy instantly starts sobbing.

“You okay! I thought somethin’ bad happent to you!”

Harley frowned, feeling the guilt ride over him again. If Tony hadn’t come for him... Peter... he would have been abandoning Peter. “I’m fine, Buddy. I just needed some time to cool off, y’know?”

Peter nods, but Harley’s pretty sure the boy wasn’t listening to him. He felt a face press into his neck and arms fall over his shoulders as the boy hugged him tightly. He rubs his hand down Peter’s back to reassure him too. He wasn’t sure how to broach whatever it was Pepper had hinted at, and he felt that whatever it was had upset Peter a lot... because he’d only been gone for a couple days. Peter shouldn’t be so inconsolable if his absence was the only thing bothering him.

“Pete? What’s really bothering you Li’l Bub?”

Peter chokes on a loud sob and shakes his head violently. “No!”

Harley winces. Not the answer he was hoping for. “C’mon,” he coaxes, “what’s wrong? Are you mad at Tony?” He could remember Peter screaming at Tony from Rhodey’s arms to leave him alone... he also remembered Rhodey mentioning to Happy the events leading up to Tony’s actions that morning. Harley hoped that everything hadn’t gone to shit just because of him. If Peter loses trust in Tony because of him... he wouldn’t forgive himself for that. Peter loved Tony. Tony was supposed to be Peter’s second shot at a dad...

Peter nods solemnly against him and Harley’s face falls into a stony frown.

“You shouldn’t be mad at him about what he did to me Peter.” His voice is sterner than he meant it to be. “He was only trying to protect you.”

“Nuh-uh!” Peter protested instantly, pulling away from his burrow against the older boy’s shoulder to fix him with a menacing glare. “He was so mean to you. You were scared. You said Daddy’s don’t make their babies scared.”

“I’m not his baby Peter,” Harley explained gently. “You are. He has to protect you before he

protects me. That's his job as your dad."

Peter's lip trembled. "You-you mean you're not my brother no more?" Before Harley could answer, Peter was crying again. "But I liked havin' a brot'er so much!"

"No, no, no," Harley panicked a bit, "that's not what I meant Pete. I just meant... I just mean... he thought I did something that coulda hurt you and Pepper a lot... and he got really mad at me."

"But you didn't!" Peter interjected sternly.

"You're right. I didn't." Harley nodded his head solemnly and slowly placed Peter back on his bed. "But if I had... if I had done what Tony thought I did, don't you think it would be good that Tony'd get mad for me doing something that would have hurt you."

Peter sniffled and stared at Harley through teary eyes. He ran his sleeve beneath his nose, and it wrinkled cutely. "Yeah, I guess."

"See. Tony was just doing his job which is making sure you're safe. No harm; no foul."

"But he s'pposed to make you safe too Ha'ley."

Harley grimaced and decided to bite the bullet. Even despite all his protests, Tony had time and time again insisted that Harley was still *a child* and needed to be *protected*. Harley wanted to roll his eyes just thinking about it.... "That's true, but I'm a bit older than you Pete. And-and Tony's not my Dad like he is yours."

Peter's head cocked to the side again cutely. "I confused. So, you ain't my brother?"

Harley struggled to find a proper way of explaining the uber complicated situation to a traumatized four-year-old. "Well... we can still be brothers, but Tony and Pepper just aren't my Mom and Dad like they're yours."

"So, who're your Mommy and Daddy then?" Peter questioned. The number of tears seemed to be deteriorating thanks to the distraction.

"Don't got any."

Peter frowned in consternation. "But you gotta have a Mommy and Daddy. Everyone's got'em."

"Not me."

There was a short lull in conversation as Peter slowly processed what Harley was saying. Apparently, he still wasn't completely satisfied with the arguments Harley was raising. "But they act it," Peter continued to argue.

"Yes, but they just aren't. It's complicated." Harley snapped. He didn't like discussing it... as much as he'd love to have a proper family again... as much as Pepper seemed to want him to be a part of their family... as much as he *wants* to be a part of their family... he knows things will run more smoothly if he just observed from the sidelines; perhaps dipping his toe in here and there for an occasional hug or pep talk. But other than that, he really doesn't need parents. As much as he'd love to have some, it was too ambitious... too easy to walk away heartbroken. Besides, he likes things the way they are.

"So, you don't want them to be your Mommy and Daddy? Is that it?"

“No- that’s not- I don--,” he sighs and breaths out a humorless chuckle. “It’s just complicated Pete. And the last thing I tried explaining something complicated to you, you went off and blabbed to Tony.”

Peter giggled and leaned forward to wrap his arms around the older boy’s neck once more. “Did not.”

Harley rolled his eyes and didn’t bother arguing. He stood, lifting Peter with him and started moving towards the door, but Peter’s soft whisper stopped him. “Harley? What if... what if Tony tried hurtin’ Mama? Hurted her like my old Daddy... that’s bad, right?”

“Yeah,” Harley answered simply. He wasn’t sure where the question had come from. It sounded outlandish and crazy to even think Tony would ever try to lay a hand on Pepper. The woman would kill him no doubt. And if she couldn’t, he’s sure both Happy and Rhodey wouldn’t mind taking a jab at him either. But he supposed Peter was just trying to cover all his bases... which was understandable.

Though, the way Peter’s earlier smile fell into a heavy frown, as if finally accepting a heavy burden, and a few more tears leak from his eyes, Harley feels there’s much more to be said. But that’s not his place, though. He’s done his part. The rest is up to Pepper... and hopefully Tony.

“Wanna go out and see PepPep? Maybe we can convince her to watch a movie with us. Whatcha think?”

Peter nodded rapidly. He pulled his face from Harley’s neck and wiped roughly at the remaining tears falling from his eyes.

Bruce doesn’t wander out from the personal recovery room until way into the evening. Pepper had coaxed both the boys into eating dinner; pushing extra onto Harley’s plate since he had skipped out on breakfast and lunch. They ate their dinner together in the Living Room while they watched some Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy and by the time it was over it was nearing Peter’s bedtime.

Pepper had half a mind to put him to bed and wait to have him visit Tony until morning. He hadn’t gone out of his way to express his interest in visiting Tony even despite Harley’s exciting rendition of the man’s heroic deeds in an effort to convince the boy. But Peter had simply shrugged and went back to fingering the chicken strips on his plate. She refrained from telling him that Tony was hurt because she wasn’t sure how he would react, and she had had quite enough of the screaming for one day. She knew he’d be upset if she told him because it was obvious Peter missed Tony and wanted to see him. The boy still cared deeply for him, but he refused to acknowledge it.

She’d only had Peter for a few weeks, but it was so easy to read what he wanted... and she knew why he was putting up such a fight. He was scared... and the thought of Peter being scared of Tony made her want to ball up her fists and scream.

So, when Bruce crept out of the room while Harley was helping Peter get dressed and ready for bed, Pepper still wasn’t quite sure what she should do.

“Is he okay?”

Bruce nodded and gave her a tired smile. “He’ll be fine, like he always is. He took quite a beating this time, though. I told him to take it easy for the next week or so, but I highly doubt he’ll stick to it for more than a day.”

Pepper nodded, forcing herself to take several deep breaths... everything was okay. “List all the

injuries. I don't want any skimping. Goodness knows Tony won't tell me everything if I ask."

Bruce chuckled under his breath at that. "Two bullet wounds. Abdomen and shoulder. The shoulder wound was just centimeters away from nicking a major artery. That's why there had been so much bleeding, but he lucked out on that one. That same shoulder was also dislocated; I'm assuming he landed on it when he hit the ground which didn't help with the bleeding from the gunshot wound. After the adrenaline wore off, I'm surprised he hadn't passed out; that bullet ended up right near his collarbone. He also had a severe patella dislocation in the left knee. I'd be surprised if it didn't take longer than a month before he'll be able to walk right again. He'll have to use a cane for a while, which he'll hate. Then there was a pretty nasty concussion he had there for a while, but he should be fine by now," Bruce rubbed his hands along his arms then stuffed them in his pockets. "There were also three broken ribs from his fall. Two on the right; one on the left; nothing he hasn't dealt with before. He has very bad scrapes and bruises all across his torso. And I disinfected and rewrapped his hand from his injury this morning--"

Pepper interrupted him with a quiet voice and a strong glare. Tony had gotten hurt before he went off gallivanting through New York. "What injury?"

Bruce looked surprised. He blinked a couple times and his mouth opened slightly to release a pitiful squeak before he started sputtering nervously. "I-I-I um thought you knew... he um... he cut up his hand this morning while he was recovering from his hangover."

Pepper nodded slowly. She knew there was more to it than Bruce was letting on, but she was anxious to see Tony and the longer she questioned him the less time she'd have alone with her husband. "Thank you so much Bruce. Do you mind coming back up in the morning to check on him?"

Bruce smiled, sweet and warm. "I was planning on it Pepper. I was hoping to check up on you too in the morning. You've been under a lot of stress and I want to make sure that both you and Morgan are doing okay."

Pepper placed her hand on her stomach and smiled, feeling a heavy weight lift from her shoulders as Bruce left. She turned to glance down the hall. She guessed she had about 5 minutes alone with Tony before the boys came looking for her again, so she hurried her way into the room.

She opened the door quietly and glanced at the man sitting upright in the fancy bed. His bloody dress shirt had been cut away. Most of his torso and right shoulder were wrapped in a tight white gauze. Several of the scars he's accumulated over the years were visible along his bare upper chest and arms and the signature scar that always adorned his left cheek was more prominent than ever, decorated in small cuts to accentuate the swollen redness. It was a sad sight that Pepper had grown used to... and no matter how many times joked about his "battle scars" she still hated them.

Tony looks over at her when she entered, and his face immediately lights up in a tired smile. He was probably still a little high from the pain meds... but Tony's always handled the effects of drugs pretty well, so she couldn't be so sure.

"Pepper," he hums, a wide grin growing across his face as his eyes blink wearily.

Pepper tries her best not to burst into tears at the sight of him... she was used to this... *why was she used to this?* She shouldn't be used to seeing the love of her life beaten and battered in his hospital bed with gauze wrapped around him and scars littering his body.

"Oh Honey," she croaked, rushing towards the bed, hand outstretched and ready to stroke the side of his face.

She bends down to kiss him softly on the lips and he happily returned it. He grins into it and Pepper slowly begins to move away, but his wrapped hand is quick to lift to the back of her neck and pull her back down to prolong the contact between them. "I'm sorry," he whispers into the kiss, hand cupping her neck, fingers creeping into her hair and thumb stroking the strip of skin right in front of her ear. "I love you. I messed up--"

That's when Pepper finally breaks. It's a tight sob that escapes through her mouth, short spurt of air relieving a bit of the pressure that had built in her throat. It's loud and wet and terrible and it immediately breaks the kiss.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Tony immediately questions, lifting his injured arm to cup the other side of her face. "Look at me."

She does. She stares at him, tears pouring from her eyes and quivered breaths pushing past her lips. She's so happy to see him and she can't even explain why. But she's so sad to see him too and the thought of him dying or getting arrested or never coming home was just too much. She had sat at home all day, worrying and wondering if he was okay, if he was going to call, if something had happened. She'd been worried sick; tempted to give into the thought of him never coming back.

She hated how soft she's gotten. She hates that one man and a swollen belly could change her outlook on life so drastically. She remembered back when she had no one to worry for: no one to care for besides herself. It was a less complicated time. A time where she wasn't constantly worried sick, folding laundry, and rushing to the bathroom every half hour. It was harder, but she doesn't think she'd trade it for anything.

"What's wrong Baby?" Tony's eyes are warm and soft as they stare up at her. It's a look that isn't foreign to her, but it is rare, and she savors it. Tony wasn't always the best at sharing affection and expressing his feelings, but she wasn't either... they were both getting much better at it, but the sight of him willingly being so open and vulnerable with her when his entire livelihood forced the opposite... it gave her chills.

"I just love you so much. I'm sorry about what happened last night... it's my fault. I shouldn't have gotten so mad at you--"

"Shh-shh-shh," Tony shushes her, pulling her down to rest her forehead against his and brush a quick kiss to her quivering lips. "Shhhh. Don't do that."

Pepper shifts to nuzzle the side of his face, nose into his hair, cheek to cheek as she revels in the warmth of his skin and the lack of dried blood coating it. "It-it just wasn't fair to you... I'm the one that got mad and you came out looking like the bad guy. You just wanted help, I'm sorry--"

"Shhh," Tony shushed once more, closing his eyes, and stroking her cheek with the back of his hand. "It's not your fault."

They stay like that for a few minutes before Pepper straightens back up and takes a deep breath. Tony's still smiling at her and she lifts a hand to brush through his hair. Tony's hand lifts as well, and he presses his palm to her stomach.

"Anything on the bastards who shot me?" He asks casually, rubbing small circles along the thin fabric of her shirt.

Pepper hums and shakes her head, lifting her other hand to wipe at her cheeks. "Nothing from Jimmy yet. I'm not even sure if he's back from his little manhunt..." There was something else in her eyes. A familiar *"you'd be in trouble if I hadn't been worried shitless all day"* look. A startling

contrast to the distress from earlier.

Tony's still mystified by her ability to mask her emotions so easily when she feels the need to.

Tony looked up at her suspiciously and quirked a brow. "The kid tattled on me, huh?"

"Yep," Pepper teased, "he told me all your dirty little secrets Anthony."

The moment is broken by a loud screech. "Mama No!"

Both turn their heads to glance towards the door where Harley stood with Peter squirming violently in his arms.

"Whoa, Pete," Harley placates, struggling to keep a safe hold of the wriggling child. He eventually lowers him to the ground and Peter immediately sprints to Pepper's side, flinging himself so his arms can wrap around both her legs. He hugs her tightly and looks at Tony. It's not so much a glare as it is a wide-eyed, crazed stare.

Pepper sighs and gently combs her hand through Peter's hair. "Pete, Baby..." she pauses and purses her lips. She hates that she has to explain this to their child. "Tony's not going to hurt me. He was never going to hurt me, okay?"

Peter doesn't seem to buy it. He doesn't move an inch, and Pepper can see Tony's happy grin from earlier fall into the usual guilty grimace as he looks down at Peter. "Hey Bug," he drawls softly, voice hoarse with pent up emotion and disuse.

Peter doesn't grace him with a response. He, instead, turns his face to hide against Pepper's legs shyly.

Harley senses the heavy tension in the room. Usually he'd go ahead and skedaddle to escape the awkwardness, but... for some reason he felt that he needed to help fix this. Tony's already done so much for both him and Peter and the way the man looked when Peter barely even addressed him made his gut twist in an uncomfortable knot.

Peter looked up to him, right? Maybe he could help... start paying back the debt he owed to both Tony and Pepper for being so kind to him despite how much of a pain in the ass he's been.

"Hey, Tony..." he starts slowly, making his way further into the room. "You dyin' yet?"

"Not quite," Tony answers with a soft chuckle, reluctantly turning his attention away from Peter. He's laid back against the pillows of his bed, looking tired and old and Harley can't help but notice the impressive number of scars all over him. "I'm gettin' there I think though."

A humorous grin grows its way across Harley's face, and he has to admit that smiling felt kinda nice nowadays. He comes closer to the bed, casting a couple looks in Peter's direction to try and capture his attention. He sees the boy glance up at him and Harley immediately takes action. He releases a shaky sigh and settles Tony with a determined nod of his head, vaguely glancing back at Peter one more time as he takes the last couple steps forward to wrap his arms around Tony's shoulders.

It's awkward. Very awkward. He doesn't understand why it's so awkward since he's pretty sure Tony and him were pretty tight now... it just felt kinda weird to whimsically initiate physical contact when he wasn't in any emotional distress and Tony wasn't suffering from either exhaustion, stress, or extreme blood loss. Basically... it wasn't an extenuating circumstance that had reached its peak of panic and desperation.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one finding the situation a bit weird. Tony seemed taken aback by the sudden display of affection too. His good arm jerks and he slowly raises it in a staticky up and down motion as if he's unsure if he should return the hug or not. He settles with a few awkward pats on his back and then Harley's pulling away, cursing himself for being so damn clingy and babyish... but it was necessary. He pulls away and glances down at Peter to gauge the reaction. He had a feeling Peter just needed a bit of a push.

"Do you wanna give Tony a hug too Peter? Hugs help him get better faster."

Peter stares at him with wide eyes, blinking rapidly as he looks between Harley and Tony multiple times before glancing up at Pepper. Pepper smiles down at him too, gently prying him away from her so she could step forward and give Tony a hug too, along with a kiss to the cheek.

Tony was ready for that one and he quickly wrapped his arms around Pepper in response.

Pepper returns to Peter's side and places a comforting hand on top of his head. Peter lifts a hand to push two of his fingers into his mouth. He looks worried and anxious and for a second Harley thinks he might burst into tears again, but then he looks from Tony then back to Harley and nods his head slowly, lifting his arms towards Harley so he could be lifted.

Harley grins triumphantly and slowly lifts Peter onto the bed beside Tony's legs. Peter sits back on his haunches there for a moment, staring at Tony and gnawing on the two fingers he had wedged in his mouth. It's easy to tell that Peter wants to give in... he just seemed to be acting shy. Harley had never seen him shy before and it almost made him laugh. Instead, Harley urges Peter forward with a gentle nudge to his lower back.

"Be careful Honey," Pepper instructs the younger boy slowly as Peter begins making his way forward, "Tony's really hurt, so we need to be gentle, alright?"

Tony's smile is wide as he watches Peter slowly crawl his way towards him. He moves his arm from his side to invite the kid closer. "Don't be silly. The kid can tackle me an' I won't care."

Peter pauses, lower lip beginning to quiver slowly as he stares at the battered form of the man lying in front of him. He scoots forward just a bit more before immediately falling back on his haunches once more and lifting his fisted hand wipe away a couple tears. "You-you hurt." He points towards the gnarly scars along his chest and the wrappings around his shoulder and torso. Tony glances down and cocks his head to the side slightly before lifting it to offer Peter a comforting smile.

"Ah, it's not that bad, kiddie. Just a few scratches, y'know."

Peter nods slowly, and it seems like it took forever, but eventually he's close enough to Tony to gently wrap his arms around his neck in a short hug. As soon as Tony's arm wraps around him in return, Peter's jolting away with a distressed cry. He holds his hands out to Pepper, making intensive grabby hands as he slowly devolves into another panicked breakdown.

Pepper slowly lifts him away from the bed and moves backwards to take a seat with him in one of the chairs against the wall, softly hushing him as she settles him comfortably in her lap. Harley tingles with the intent to jump in and assist, but he knows he won't be any help, so he turns to look at Tony instead. The man looks steely and tense. His gaze dropped to the white sheet covering his legs, and he gripped the edges of the fabric. Harley knew he was upset. He may not cry, or pout, or mope like others, but he was still upset.

Harley pulled a chair up to the side of the bed. When he sat down Tony looked up at him and cocked him a smirk to mask the hurt. Harley returned it with a pitying smile.

“He’ll come around,” Harley said in a low voice, nodding his head firmly. “I don’t know exactly what went down, but... he’s four.... He’ll get over it I’m sure.”

Tony’s smirk morphs into a grateful smile and he lifts his hand, so his forearm is raised, propping his elbow on the bed. Harley leans forward to clasp hands and Tony squeezes his in a quiet thank you before they both let go and drift into a heavy silence.

Soon, Peter’s cries peter out and the room is quiet. Harley twists around to see Pepper rocking him from side to side in her chair, looking tired and sad. When they meet eyes, Pepper smiles at him and shifts just a bit, but it doesn’t reach her eyes like it typically does.

“Harley, would you mind putting him to bed please? And why don’t you get yourself a shower while you’re at it, hm? Start getting ready for bed too.”

Harley nods his head with a quick “yes ma’am” and approaches her, ready to take Peter. Thankfully, Peter goes with him without much protest, but by the time they reach the door to exit the room, Peter’s struggling in his arms.

“Mama?” He squeaks pitifully, arms extended over Harley’s shoulder towards Pepper. “You comin’?”

“No Baby,” Pepper answers slowly, standing from her chair to grab onto Peter’s tiny hand. “I’m going to stay here with Tony tonight.”

Peter absorbs her words and turns his head to look at Tony. He turns back to Pepper, looking distraught and panicked. “No. I stay wit’ you.” He reaches for her again, and Harley almost tips backwards when Peter tries vaulting over his shoulder.

“You need to go to sleep Baby.”

“I stay wit’ you!” Peter argues adamantly. Harley’s sure the boy would have stomped his foot if he were on the ground.

Pepper didn’t seem to be in much of a mood to be arguing. So, she sighed and gave into Peter’s demands, taking him back in her arms and returning to her seat.

Harley stood awkwardly near the door, shuffling back and forth. He could see Tony looking at him from beneath heavy eyelids, but the man didn’t say anything... so Harley gulped and twiddled his thumbs to dispel some of his nervous energy. He didn’t want to cross a line.

“Um...” Pepper immediately looks up at him once he spoke. “Can I stay for a bit too?”

Her brows furrow in that motherly reprimand-y way again. “Honey, you must be exhausted. Don’t you wanna clean up and go to bed.”

She’s right. Harley really did feel tired. That ten-minute snooze on Tony’s shoulder hadn’t done him much good and he felt bone dead tired... but for some reason, the idea of leaving this room just didn’t feel right.

“I just... I’d just like to stay is all.”

Before Pepper could continue to protest, Tony interrupts her with a groan as he shifts in his bed, rustling the sheets. His next words come out in a forced sigh. “Let ‘im stay if he wants, Pep. He’ll get some sleep when he passes out from exhaustion.”

So, Harley stays. He takes his seat once more at the chair he'd pulled up beside Tony's bed. Tony winks at him as he settles back into a comfortable position. Harley smiles back.

An hour in and Harley has his head pillowed on his crossed arms which rest on the bed beside Tony's legs. Pepper's still humming some sort of lullaby for Peter and every time she tries to stop Peter whines loudly in protest. In all honesty, Harley thinks if she continues any longer, she'll be putting him to sleep before Peter.

A big yawn ends up waking him up though and he lifts his head and raises his arm to stretch his sore shoulders.

"You good, kid?" Tony asks with a hoarse whisper. Harley looks at him and nods slowly as a smaller yawn breaks free. He honestly has no idea how Tony is still awake. He looked exhausted, but for some reason he's obviously fighting sleep and Harley didn't understand why.

"You can rest y'know," Harley murmurs, pillowing his head on his arms once more, resting his cheek on his forearm so he could look at Tony. "You look pretty tired."

Tony hums in agreement. "I'm exhausted."

Harley frowns. "Then why you still awake?"

He sees the man's gaze flicker towards Pepper and Peter across the room, but Harley still doesn't understand. "I'm waitin' for that rascal to fall asleep first."

Harley thinks he may have hit his head a bit harder than Bruce might have thought, but he leaves it be and shrugs his shoulders, closing his eyes as he zeroes in on the sound of Pepper's melodious hums and the quiet beep, beep, beep of the wireless heart monitor.

He doesn't know at what point he fell asleep.

Tony's still awake a half hour later, but he could feel the fight for sleep slowly dragging him down. He had nothing but his own thoughts to stimulate his mind, which didn't seem to be enough. He glanced down towards his legs to see Harley conked out in a deep sleep and he rolls his eyes with a tight smile. Then he turns to look at Pepper; the love of his life. She looked so tired as she slowly rocked her body back and forth. She had stopped humming about five minutes ago which must mean Peter had finally slipped off to sleep.

"He sleepin'?" Tony croaked softly.

Pepper startles just a bit at his voice and she lifts her head to look at him. Then she smiles and cranes her neck back to try and get a look at Peter's face then nods.

Tony's arm was heavy and sore, but he outstretched it anyway and wiggled his fingers. He had an itch that needed to be scratched and he didn't know why, but he just really, *really* wanted a hug from Peter. "Give'm here."

Pepper hesitates and casts him a wary look. "I don't know if that's such a good idea Tony. What if he wakes up?"

"Then he wakes up," Tony answers simply. "Now bring him here."

Pepper stands slowly and approaches the bed, not exactly in the mood to argue with the man. She took slow steps to avoid jostling the boy. Goodness knows she didn't want him to wake up and

start screaming again.

Tony must have saw the look on her face and a smug grin split across his face. "Y'know... once Morgan's born there's gonna be even more screaming."

Pepper rolls her eyes at him and gently lowers Peter so his bum rested on the edge of the bed. Tony reached out to steady him as Pepper slowly detached her shirt and hair from Peter's tight grip. Peter stirred, eyes blinking open blearily, and he whined.

"Mama?"

Tony curses, grip on the back of Peter's shirt tightening ever so slightly. But Pepper takes advantage of Peter's drowsiness and nudges him into Tony's arms.

"Mama's coming back soon sweetheart. Snuggle with Daddy for a bit, okay?"

Tony pulls the boy closer, good arm wrapping around his back and Peter doesn't hesitate one bit to sink into his arms. "Daddy?" He mumbles quietly, small arms stuttering in cute confusion as they maneuver around the sheets to wrap his arms around Tony's torso. Tony smiles as he tucks perfectly beneath his arm.

"Daddy's right here Bubba. Just go to sleep, hmm? I'll see you in the morning."

Peter doesn't seem to care one bit. He just sighs in acknowledgement and presses closer, so his face fit snuggle against the cotton gauze around the older man's chest.

Tony smiles and runs his hand along Peter back, as Pepper brushes her fingers through his hair.

She notices the look teary-eyed look in Tony's expression as he stared down at the boy in his arms. She removes her hand from Peter's hair and moves to comb through Tony's.

At her touch, his neck snaps up to look at her. He looks tired, defeated, and... well he just looked kinda hellish.

She smiled down at him. "Things will work out Honey. He'll bounce back soon enough."

Tony hmphed in a humorless chuckle. "Yeah. I guess I just never thought I'd have to steal hugs from my kid when he was too tired and delirious to know any better."

"He'll be back to his Daddy's boy ways soon enough, Hon. Just give him some time."

Tony nods.

"Why don't you take Harley on up to bed so he can sleep good tonight," Tony suggests, "then you can freshen up and get ready for bed." He pats the empty space in the bed next to him. "There's plenty of room right here."

Pepper settles her hand on Peter's head once more. "You sure?"

"Positive." Tony nods.

Then with that, Pepper leaves with Harley stumbling along behind her and the boy had barely even registered Tony and Peter in the bed.

Then, Tony's alone. He's alone with Peter tucked under his arm.

He ducks his head to press his face against the boys unruly curls. They tickle his nose. He can smell the watermelon shampoo. He could feel the warm weight of his tiny body.

A year ago, it was something that he would have never thought he'd miss. He never thought he could ever feel so attached to a child that wasn't even his.

Peter mumbled something in his sleep, and Tony ducked his head once more to press a series of lingering kisses to the top of his head... "Shhh. You're okay Bubba."

He missed this.

He had thought he lost it...

But maybe not.

So, he rested his cheek against the boys hair and sighed a breath of relief. If he worked at it, he's sure he could gain the boys trust once more... there was just something about him. Something about the idea of Peter being apart from him that felt so, so wrong.

He didn't remember tears slipping past his eyes... but apparently, they had because his cheeks were growing damp. He released a shuddery breath and twisted his neck to press one last chaste kiss to his kid's hair...

Everything will turn out alright. He knows it will... because the universe would most definitely implode if they didn't.

Chapter End Notes

So, fun fact. I actually finished editing this chapter while on a long flight to Illinois. Do yall have any idea how painfully slow it is to type out an 11,000 word chapter on a mobile phone. Yeah... and I'm posting this while I'm waiting for the airplane to dock or whatever the heck that's called...

Yeah... I wont be having wifi for the next few days and I just wanted to get this one out before I go off the grid y'know. Lol. So if you guys see any icky errors, definitely let me know. It's harder to edit and get stuff right on my phone instead of my computer at home.

Thanks so much. Love you guys!

I know not much happened this chapter, but idk. I promise that theres more interesting stuff to come. Hope yall enjoyed it tho. Thanks so much for reading.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait folks. This chapter was also a pain...

I just hate writing these filler chapters, but I hope you enjoy it. It's a necessary evil I suppose.

I've also dropped a few hints to the coming conflict... see if you can pick them out.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Captain, you can’t possibly be serious,” Ben Reilly grumbled with open-mouthed disdain. “We have all we need to bring him in. *Video evidence* of him housing two missing kids and speeding down backroads firing illegally acquired weapons at an unidentified vehicle. We got him. We need to bring him in before he causes any more havoc on this city.”

First off, Steve thought, *no*. Tony Stark was the only person keeping this city - this country even - from descending into absolute and utter chaos. The world was out of control and Steve wouldn’t be risking his career and compromising his moral integrity to help the two-faced businessman if he didn’t feel Stark’s influence was best for the people’s safety and sanity. He wanted to say it, but he kept his trap shut and instead slowly stood from his chair and braced both hands against his desk, leaning over the mess of case files, papers, and half-empty coffee cups littered across the rugged wooden surface. He tries his best to cast an authoritative glare, but he’s sure he looked like he hadn’t slept in days. Stark wasn’t answering his calls, and Rhodes wasn’t giving him any answers either. He could only put things off for so long before people started to grow suspicious.

He had tried warning him to lay low for a while, but lo and behold the man elected to ignore him. Steve couldn’t exactly say he was surprised either. He just couldn’t help but be a little annoyed that the man seemed so determined to purposefully keep him out of the loop. He wasn’t used to *not* being in charge and *not* knowing the plan and it was making him jittery and anxious.

Although, he had to give the man credit where it was due. He’d been protecting the kid... at least he hopes that was his excuse for flying down the streets of the Bronx at 100 miles an hour, chasing and shooting at an unregistered car with a military grade rifle hanging out the back blowing out police cruisers tires.

Either way, the more time that passes without a word from Stark, the more stressed he got, and the more stressed he got the pissier he started to feel. And the pissier he felt the harder it was not to hurl something at someone’s head... particularly at Stark's head, but he supposed his new brown-nosing lieutenant would do just the trick.

“Reilly,” he spoke with a quiet demand in his voice, “I want you to pause and think for a moment. You’re talking about Tony Stark; owner of the largest tech conglomerate and weapon manufacturing company on the planet. Potentially the leader of the most powerful organized crime syndicate that has been illegitimately reigning over the public for generations. He has dirty cops stationed in every NYPD precinct, the FBI, CIA, MI6, Homeland Security and whatever other government run organization you can think of. Heck, I wouldn’t be surprised if he had cabinet members and Senators loyal to him.” As he speaks, his anger only continues to rise with his

frustration. “He has more money than some of the richest men in history put together. He has the best lawyers this country, or any country for that matter, has to offer. He has more political, economic, and social influence on the people than the President himself. So tell me Lieutenant... how wise would it be for us to try and strike against one of the most powerful men in mankind’s history without solid, undeniable proof that wouldn’t feed him the chance to escape and come back at us even stronger?”

Ben Reilly stiffens as he slowly absorbs the angry tension building up in his Captain.

“You think I don’t want to bring this bastard down? I’ve been chasing after him my whole career. And he’s evaded me time and time again, despite any evidence I may grab against him. You wanna know how? He’s a genius mastermind Reilly. There’s really no other way to put it. Anything you throw at him he’ll return tenfold. Every step you take... he’ll be ten steps ahead. There’s no going against Tony Stark and his people. Not unless the UN goes after them himself... and I’d be surprised if more than half of them weren’t supporters of him already. So, no, stand down. Always keep officers stationed around the Tower just in case a riot breaks out or whatnot, but under no circumstances are you to engage with any member of the Stark Family; blood family or crime family. Got it?”

“But, sir--”

“That was an order Lieutenant! That was not up for discussion. You’re dismissed.”

Steve sees something akin to anger flash across the middle-aged man’s face. A look Steve has witnessed often on the man’s face during the short time he’d been an officer at his precinct. He was obviously reluctant to leave, but he turns on his heel and exits the spacious office anyways. Steve stands as he exits and moves towards the windows to draw the blinds shut, coating the room in an eerie darkness, only lightened by the morning sun rising above the horizon.

He groans and flops down in his chair, rubbing his hands over his face, cursing Stark for making his life so goddamn problematic. He wishes Buck was still with him, so he didn’t have to put up with Reilly. The guy had barely been an officer for two years and he was already climbing the ranks faster than what he thought should be allowed, and because of it... he feels entitled and in charge... and he was *sick* of it.

He groans again and throws his arm towards his desk to grope around for the flip phone buried somewhere beneath the papers. He grabs it and on muscle-memory alone, dials the number he’d been dialing on and off for days. He thumbs in the number because having a sought-after criminal’s personal phone number saved was the first big no-no of being a dirty cop.

He waited anxiously as he listened to the dial tone... and he listened until it cut out.

He cursed in anger and chucked the phone across the room, leaving a reasonable sized dent in the wall. He growls, mutters under his breath, and turns back to his computer.

“Damn Stark.”

Rhodey grumbles through the entire duration of his ride up to the penthouse. It was nearing 7 in the morning and he hadn’t slept since the catastrophic domino effect of events started. All he wanted was to be able to fall asleep in peace without having to worry about being awoken in the middle of the night to bright lights and handcuffs being locked around his wrists.

He'd already set into motion 'the cleanse'... just in case. Their best hackers were downstairs siphoning money into SI with legal revenue excuses so it couldn't be traced back to the not-so-legal means it was acquired. They were in the midst of transporting the weapons and drugs to an underground facility miles away-- everything was just... there was so much to do and half of it couldn't be done without Tony or Pepper stepping in to start fixing the mess that had been created.

They've already put this off long enough and Rhodey's quite surprised the government hadn't waltzed in to arrest all of them the second after Hydra-man's international broadcast. And the fact that Tony's yet to make an effort to jump into the cleanup means all the responsibility falls on his sleep-deprived, pissy shoulders.

Let's just say he'd like at least a little support downstairs. Injured or not Tony needs to kick his ass into gear... Tony Stark had survived and operated on much worse. And he needs to get on top of this little exposure nightmare.

"JARVIS? What's Tony up to?" He asked impatiently.

"Boss is currently being subjected to one of Dr. Banner's instructional tangents regarding safety and discretion." JARVIS answered with a hint of humor lining his tone. Rhodey smirked slightly and a pained chuckle escaped his lungs. He doesn't say anything more. If Tony's getting an earful from the characteristically recluse and composed doctor that he oh so admired, then maybe that would make him realize that, no, being reckless and damn near suicidal is not a proper coping mechanism.

He wished Tony would get those reprimands much more often.

When he exits the lift, he steps into the Living Room, rubbing at his forehead and squinting his eyes in hopes his migraine would slowly ebb away on its own. The tumultuous chaos downstairs was nearing the point of uncontrollable and he needed something, anything... any idea or word from Tony to help calm the cynical speculations of what was to happen now.

He sees Pepper perched in an armchair, flipping through a heavy-looking novel, and he invites himself to collapse on the long sofa adjacent to her for a moment of relaxation before he exasperates his headache further by interacting with his pissy boss so early in the morning.

"You doing okay there, Jimmy?" Pepper questions without looking up from her book.

Rhodey turns his head to glare at her, but without her attention settled on him it doesn't have the desired effect. "No. Your husband's made my life a living hell."

He can see a small smile sneak its way across the woman's face and she hums in acknowledgement as she absently strokes her covered stomach.

Rhodey drops it and sighed in contentment as he absorbs the quiet calmness, eyes closed and relaxing into the cushions of the couch... it seemed uncannily quiet and he suddenly realizes why. Peter was an early riser. "Where're the boys?"

"Harley's still asleep and I just got Peter back down."

Rhodey could tell by the tone of her voice that something had happened, so he cracked open one eye to look at her. "What happened with Pete?"

He could see her tense slightly at his inquiries, but after a few moments she finally decides to put down her book with a soft sigh and turn to look at him with a pursed smile. "He had quite the meltdown this morning."

Rhodey couldn't say he was surprised. Peter had been pretty distraught the past couple of days.

Pepper shook her head in exasperated annoyance, as if she were upset with herself and dropped her gaze to glare at her lap. "Tony insisted on holding Peter last night after he fell asleep while I went to take a shower. I don't know *why* he thought it'd be an innovative idea. Peter had barely even been able to give Tony a hug without devolving into sobs because he was so scared. I knew I should have just put him in his own bed after I got back," she grimaced and looked back up at Rhodey, "but Tony had fallen asleep and had such a tight hold on him... and-and Peter just looked so peaceful for the first time since all this happened and-and I just couldn't pull them apart like that. I thought things might turn out better in the morning when Pete woke up and saw things were mostly back to the way they were before. But then I woke up to Peter pounding on Tony's chest at 5 in the morning, screeching and wailing and I... and I just-- I don't know what to do with them Jimmy. Tony hasn't said a word since Peter woke up. He refuses to talk to me, and I know it's because he feels guilty and angry about what happened."

Rhodey sits up properly and braces both elbows on either of his knees to cradle his head in his hands. "Damn Pep..." he mutters, scratching at his scalp. "I didn't... I thought the kid would be over it the instant he saw Tones again. Those two were thick as thieves before all this shit went down."

"I know," she sighs, making a move to reopen her book to disregard the heaviness her admission had created in the room. Then, thinking better of it, she turned her attention back to the man sitting beside her. "What's all going on downstairs? I'm sure with everything that's been happening it's complete chaos. You look like you haven't slept in days."

Rhodey hid his face and rolled his eyes with a sigh. *She had no idea.*

"I just need to talk to Tony. He's good with chaos."

When Bruce finishes berating Tony for his recklessness, Rhodey makes his way into the room as the good doctor goes to administer his checkup on Pepper and the baby.

He enters the room to find it eerily stiff and thick with an uneasy tension. The only sound is the urgent rustling of sheets as Tony struggled to throw off the thin blankets tangled around his legs and exit the bed. He was already halfway out the bed by the time he caught sight of Rhodey hanging idly by the door. And the way the man's eyes bugged out as if he were about to get in trouble was such an unusual look to see on his face. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the distress was quickly painted over with a thin lining of aggressive frustration. The man's lips curl up in a bare-toothed snarl and he continues his escape from the bed.

Rhodey leaves him to it, content with allowing the man a few moments of sound mind before he jumps at him with all the shit going on in his company and not-so legal better half of it.

Tony keeps his body propped against the bed to support his weight as he somehow managed to wrangle himself into an old pair of jeans, and he settled without a shirt now that his injured arm was in a sling. When Tony looks up at him again, he barely grunts in acknowledgement and turns away to grab the standard looking cane propped beside the bed. It was meant to help him walk while his leg healed.

"You good, man?" Rhodey questions tentatively with a worried crease of his brows. Tony was rarely quiet. He was always jabbering about something or another whether it be with purpose or to distract, deflect, and annoy. Tony always had something to say and this uncanny silence was not a

good sign. Rhodey didn't know whether it was worry, empathy, or guilt that was slowly eating away at Rhodey's chest until a hollow feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't seen Tony so disassociated since the day he went to identify his mother's body, per Obadiah's insistence. Since then, his best friend's mental health seemed to be on a steady decline.

Rhodey felt hope when he had met Pepper... because Tony actually got better. He smiled more; joked like he used to and was just all around happier. But then the pregnancy had happened... and then Killian... and the baby... and Tony got bad again in a very masked and almost unidentifiable way. It was one of his lowest points, and Rhodey hadn't realized how well Tony had handled it until after he came back from Afghanistan, traumatized, mute, and coiled as tight as a spring. He got better, slowly. And then the second pregnancy... Morgan... then Harley... and Peter.

Tony had been getting better again. Rhodey was sure that this was it; this is the reward Tony Stark received for all the good he tried to implement onto the world.

But now things were messy again. Rhodey couldn't imagine the pain of having the constant fear of growing to love something and having it torn away time and time again. Yet, his best friend dealt with it every day... and the nightmare was slowly becoming a reality.

Rhodey just hopes he could bounce back because he doubts they'll be able to come out of this with both the boys still under their care.

"Just peachy," Tony growled with a slight rasp.

Rhodey saw the man's entire body recoil as he pushed his weight onto his legs, and Rhodey immediately rushed forward to help stabilize him before he ended up hurting himself. Tony doesn't even fight him off, which only solidified his standing worry.

"You find the bastards that shot at the kid?"

Rhodey supports him as he got used to the cane. Once Tony finally stabilized himself, he shrugged Rhodey off and started milling around the room, opening cabinets and slamming them closed as he growled and grumbled nonsensical words under his breath. His search continued growing more fervent and Rhodey simply settled with staying out of his way as he bolted from drawer to drawer at a speed that shouldn't be possible with the injuries he'd sustained.

While Rhodey watched him, he couldn't help but come to a ridiculous realization. *That was a fashionable cane*, but then again... it was Tony Stark. Everything about him was fashionable. He just never thought a person could make limping along with a cane look so majestic. In fact, it made the man appear just a bit more menacing than usual... maybe it was because of the constant scowl etched into his face as he grew more and more frustrated with his fruitless search. Or maybe it reminded him of his late grandmother and the constant smacks upside the head he'd receive from the hard-wooden stick when he rummaged through her pocketbook.

"Rhodey!" Tony snapped, glaring at him from across the room when the man neglected to answer him.

Rhodey cleared his throat. "Yeah, sorry. Just kinda exhausted. Um... I got names, but the cops got 'em before we could. We lost them there for a few minutes and we doubled back to find a police cruiser T-boned into the passenger side. We got outta there and I called Rogers... Apparently his new Lieutenant, Ben Reilly, got 'em in custody. He says he can get a transport set up for us to intercept in a couple days, but he's gotta wait till the heat dies down a bit... he also says he needs to talk to you..."

Tony nods, waving off the last concern. "Good. Great."

Rhodey watches carefully, furrowing his brows, as Tony fumbles with an electronically locked drawer and pulled it open with a harsh tug after thumbing in the code. Then, he's pulling out a long syringe filled with a dodgy looking orange liquid and pulling off the cap with his teeth. He jams the long needle into the side of his injured arm before Rhodey even has the chance to react.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Tones, what the heck are you doing?!" He rushes forward just as Tony presses down on the plunger and spits out the cap from his mouth. He feels his heart stutter... was he trying *something* again? He wouldn't, right? Not when there was so much at risk... when Pepper and the boys needed him most... "What the hell did you just put in your body?"

"It's just a little something I've been working on," Tony sighs with a small shudder. He pulled the syringe out from his arm with a shaky hand and practically slaps it onto the counter when his strength begins giving out, leaving him with only small spurts of twitched, mechanical movement. Rhodey catches him just in time before his legs collapse beneath him.

"Yeah, well, you probably shoulda worked on it a little more before you dosed yourself up." He grunts as he dragged Tony over to settle into a nearby chair. Tony's head lolls back and Rhodey pats his cheek to wake him up. "Please don't do this man... You aren't gonna leave me with all this crap to clean up by myself."

"I's fine," Tony slurs slowly with a slight scoff. "Not g'nna die, idiot. I's supposed to do this. Body's gotta..." he trails off for a good second, looking high as a kite, "Body's gotta compensate... jus' give... jus' giv't a few secon's."

So, Rhodey waits... and waits... and his head never stops buzzing the entire time.

After about ten minutes, Tony finally comes to with a surprised jolt and red eyes. He coughs violently and doubles over at the waist. Dry heaves wrack his body and he nearly chokes from the thick saliva trickling from his open mouth.

"Hell," he groans with a gasp. Rhodey pats his back. "That didn't feel too good. Prob'ly shoulda ate first."

"What the hell was that?" Rhodey presses insistently.

Tony waves him off carelessly and slowly sits back up. "It's an enhancement. Cellular regeneration. It only works on flesh wounds so far, but heck man... that hurts like a bitch." As if to prove his point, Tony slowly starts unwrapping the gauze around his torso. As he unravels himself from the wrappings, Rhodey watches as the long white strands slowly fade into a darkened red. Then Tony's chest is bare as he snatches the last of the stained gauze from his torso. The skin is still matted in dried blood, but there's no trace of a wound of any kind. All the scrapes and bruises that he would have surely received after falling out of a moving vehicle were gone...

And now that he thought about it, the small cuts along his face and arms had faded into nothing but tanned skin.

"Holy shit!" Rhodey gasps, dropping his head to get a better look. Tony jerks away when Rhodey presses against the space where the wound once was, and he hisses in pain.

"Only flesh wounds Rhodes. The ribs are still broken."

"Right. Sorry man," he removes his hands and turns to meet Tony's eyes. "How's it work? And how much more do you got? Do you know what this could mean?"

Tony chuckles softly under his breath at Rhodey's enthusiasm and reaches towards the counter for fresh gauze and a washcloth to clean away the old blood.

"It's rather complicated. I combined ideas for Killian's Extremis and Osborn's cross genetics to fashion a mellowed-out version of their designs. That was the first time I tested it out on human flesh though." He starts unwrapping the cloth around his hand and flexes his fingers as he examines his newly healed palm. The faded spiderwebbed scars remained, but they weren't anywhere near as prominent as they would have been if it would have healed on its own. "I've only just started working on it... And I've only tested it with my blood. I'm not sure if specific DNA modifications need to be changed to the dose for each person. But, yes, I do realize the benefit it will have. Just..." Tony looks over at him seriously. "Don't tell anyone about it yet. Especially Bruce or Pepper. They're already on my case enough as is. If either of them found out I injected an untested drug into my body, I'd never hear the end of it."

Rhodey nods. "Of course. But just imagine what this could do for us Tony. Not only for our guys... imagine if we could manufacture it. People would pay a fortune for this stuff. We can forget about old fashioned drug running. You could- you could be the world's first trillionaire, man. You'd be untouchable."

The potential this held had Rhodey's mind reeling. This could fix everything.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Oh, yes. Whatever could I do with even more money?" He scoffed sarcastically and started wrapping fresh gauze around his torso to keep up appearances for Bruce and Pepper. "You ever think that maybe it could be used for a good deed here and there? Besides, if the pharmaceutical companies got their hands on this... it'd be game over for everyone."

Rhodey narrowed his eyes. "When did you become such a humanitarian?"

"Let's just drop it, alright?"

Rhodey doesn't want to drop it. There's a lot more he'd like to discuss about the potential of this futuristic drug, but there just so happened to be more pressing matters that really needed to be discussed. And maybe if they discussed them, Tony would change his mind.

"Fine. I have important things I need to talk with you about, anyways."

Tony tilted his chin up in a gesture for him to continue. So, Rhodey straightens his posture and twists in his seat so he's perched on the very edge as he settles his best friend with a serious look.

"Things are going just a bit chaotic downstairs. The strike team from yesterday was ambushed at the warehouse. Two rookies are in the infirmary and we lost one during the conflict..."

"Who?"

Rhodey's head bowed sorrowfully. "It was Rio, Tones."

Tony's jaw stiffened and his gaze hardened after his sharp intake of breath. "We'll be sure to have her a proper burial service." He croaks. "Any family?"

"Not that I know of."

Tony nods slowly. "Alright, alright. Make it honorable as hell."

Rhodey could see the guilt already in his face. Sometimes it drove him nuts how much his best friend blamed himself for every little thing that went wrong. So, he put a hand on his back and

squeezed his shoulder.

“Don’t do that to yourself Tones. You did what was most important. You were watching out for your kid, and you got there just in time... and I think all this,” he gestures to Tony’s practically mangled body, “is punishment enough. ‘Sides,” Rhodey grins cheekily, “the world would most definitely descend into chaos without you watching its back.”

“Yeah, sure,” Tony deflects with a dismissive wave of his hand. “And what’s the verdict on my inevitable arrest?”

Rhodey winces. “About that... there are some officers stationed outside with the protestors and paparazzi. They’ve got a few nests situated in buildings surrounding the Tower too. I’d say you got less than 24 hours before they come running in here guns’a blazing. At the very least you’re going to have to submit to that court hearing of Ross’ if you wanna avoid a showy arrest. Steve said he’s been trying to get ahold of you all day so you can work something out. He didn’t sound too confident in this going away on its own though... too many witnesses.”

Tony growled under his breath. “God this is all so messed up. Can’t he get statements from the bastards his officer brought in? If they confess, we can claim self-defense.”

Rhodey shakes his head. “He’s tried. They don’t speak English; only some weird evolved variation of Dari, Uzbek and some other language, and there aren’t any local translators. Google can’t even understand them. So, technically he can’t question them until he knows for certain they can understand their rights... and he also needs to understand what they are saying.”

“That’s bullshit and he knows it. They can obviously speak a normal language. They’re just trying to play the system,” Tony snaps.

Rhodey shrugs with a soft sigh. “He’s still a police officer Tony. He has to go by the rules if he doesn’t want to get suspended.”

“Well they should *understand* that shooting at a fourteen-year-old kid is an arrestable offense no matter the language or country! Now, I’m the one that’s gonna have to take the fall for all this.”

"I think that’s the point," Rhodey huffed, collapsing back into his seat. "A lotta damage control’s gotta happen if you want to stay out of prison."

“There’s no way I’m getting out of this with Ross dead set on me never seeing the light of day again.” He clasps his hands in his lap and glowers down at them.

“What about the Hydra guy? I know you hate his guts right now, but he’s basically called out Ross on his bullshit and cleared your name for all the serious stuff. All you gotta do is explain what’s going on with the boys and lawyer up to make sure they can’t touch you.”

Tony scoffed. “What about the crazy car chase shootout? I’m sure there’s plenty of video evidence for that. I doubt Rogers can get me outta that Scott free, even with a confession from those Dari idiots.” Tony’s head bobs up to fix Rhodey with an indignant stare.

Rhodey shrugs with a sigh. “You’ve gotten outta worse.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Like that’s an excuse.”

Rhodey huffed in exasperation. “Well, what do you want me to do, Tony? I can’t just magically fix this and make it all go away. Maybe if you presented your new cellular regen enhancement, they could cut you some slack--”

“Absolutely not!” Tony growled, slamming his fist down on the blanketed mattress. “Do you know what Hydra could do if they got their grimy hands on it?”

“You wouldn’t be giving it to Hydra--”

Tony whacks him in the head with the cane. “Wake up DingDong! *Ross* is Hydra. The *Pres-i-dent* . *Presidente* . Almighty executive officer. Ruler of the free world. Man out for my head since I won’t help his sick little army take over the world. Ringing any bells?”

Rhodey’s brows furrowed in confusion. “I thought his involvement was speculative Tones.”

Tony holds up his hand and begins listing off Ross’ offenses. “He worked with Stane; Hydra. He works with Oscorp; Hydra. And I’m sure he wasn’t innocent when it came to my kidnapping with the Ten Rings, which by the way - unless you’ve been living under a goddamn rock - *Hydra!*”

“Alright, Tones, my mistake. Calm down, yeah? I’m just brainstorming ideas here. Just be glad the CPS hasn’t come knockin’ down our doors yet, yeah?”

Tony growled under his breath and heaves himself out of the chair. He stumbled forward with the cane tapping along sporadically beside him as he rushed towards the bed in a swarm of flying limbs and stumbling steps. “I’m gonna kill that sick son of a bitch when I get my hands on him.” He heaved.

Tony curses himself for being oblivious enough to let this happen. He should have seen it coming, but he’d turned a blind eye to everything because he’d been distracted by menial things. He released the cane, letting it clatter to the floor, and he braced both his hands on the edge of the bed. He hadn’t even *thought* of the boys being taken away from him. How could he have not thought of that? “Give me some good news Rhodes.” He begged breathlessly, head bent, and eyes pressed closed, inhaling slowly to calm his racing heart. He couldn’t start thinking about it... because if he did, he’d never be able to stop.

“Well... “ Rhodey trailed off, tapping his fingers against his belt. He cursed himself for mentioning the whole CPS thing so soon. “aside from all the ‘kidnapping’ and ‘kinda obvious but still a secret criminal organization’ accusations, you’re actually getting some good publicity with the general public.”

Tony grunts at him to continue, kneading the tips of his fingers into his skull. “Please,” he groans, “enlighten me.” He literally couldn’t care any less about his public image. Not when all he could think about is how heartbroken Peter and Pepper would be if they had to be separated... or how much Harley would isolate himself from future attachment. He didn’t even let himself think about how much danger the kid would be in without his protection... Pepper would surely kill him for this.

And he didn’t know how he was going to fix it.

“JARVIS pull up the pictures from yesterday--”

“He’s not connected to any wireless servers,” Tony interrupts gruffly, “I need to reinforce and update him before he can wander free through Google again.” He rolls his eyes and continues under his breath. “I swear he has the immunity of a child during flu season.”

Rhodey sighs and pulls out his phone. There’s a hot minute where neither of them say anything and Tony broods as Rhodey flicks through whatever it was he was trying to find. And then he found it and shoved the device in front of Tony’s face, hoping it somehow might lift the man’s spirits.

A positive, hopeful Tony was a problem-solving Tony. And that's the Tony he needed right now.

"Look. Twitter's even started a petition to try and overrule any potential sentencing. I know it's not much... but Ross is a greedy man... He'll want to be reelected and anything that might put him in a bad light with the people might deter him, y'know."

Tony doesn't seem to hear him. Instead, his anger and panic flares at seeing himself beaten and battered for the public to see and he grabs the phone and glares at the screen. There, glaring back at him, is a clear unobstructed photo of him and Harley sitting on the bench while the kid dozed off against him. They're both bloody and bruised. "What the hell is this? Who took this picture?! People know better than to take incriminating pictures of me in public. I thought I made that clear at the last press conference. I want their name and address--"

"Tony, calm down." Rhodey placated, resting a hand on the man's shoulder. "This is *good* for a change." Rhodey takes back the phone and quickly thumbs to the next thing, which turns out to be a grainy video. "I saw this one this morning. It's all over the news, actually."

The cameraman is cursing in the background as it follows the sleek black vehicle that's peeling down the street with the blurry silhouette of a man - who Tony recognizes as himself - hanging out the window.

"*Holy shit,*" the guy shouts as a loud gunshot rings out and Tony goes tumbling onto the cement below. The video continues, the cameraman running towards the chaotic scene as screams and scrambling footsteps sound around him, running in the opposite direction.

And Tony watches with pursed brows as the video zooms in on his motionless form and then immediately jolts to the side just in time to capture the moment when Harley throws himself out of the car as well... and then the guy is cursing again.

Tony rolls his eyes and shoves the device back into Rhodey's hands. "So, the entire world witnessed my major wipeout... I don't see how this is considered good news Rhodes. In fact, I see this more as video evidence just screaming for my arrest."

Rhodey wants to slap him for his incompetence, but he tries to keep in mind that the man had quite literally drugged himself up only moments earlier, before suffering a near mental break at the mention of maybe losing the kids he'd developed an unhealthy attachment to. "Well, Tones... typically kidnapped victims don't go tumbling out of cars to run to their kidnappers and then cuddle up to them and doze off."

"It wasn't *cuddling*. I don't *cuddle*." Tony immediately protested. Rhodey settled him with a blank stare and swiped his thumb across the screen of his phone once more to show a screenshot of the moment in his Living Room right before he realized everything was about to go batshit crazy. Peter snuggled up against him on the couch, hiding his face against his chest and his floury hair making an utter mess of his black tank. Tony scowled at the reminder of what once was and hurried to wave off Rhodey's blatant reminder that, *yes, you're a softy now*.

"So, what are you trying to say? I'm pretty sure that kidnapping is still kidnapping no matter the relationship. Fathers get hit with kidnapping charges all the time. Snuggling your kidnapped victims isn't typically a compelling argument people use in court."

"Yes, but if you claim extenuating circumstances, and that you had to take the kids under your wing because they were in danger... that might lead to something," Rhodey presses. "You might at least be able to salvage a bit of your reputation with the public. Famous people with a lot of money get away with a lot of stuff, Tony. You should know this. And jurors got it soft for sensitive dad-

folk who take in kids for the greater good... They'll eat this up."

"Yes, but what about the kids? If I address this," he glares as he jams his pointer finger into the bed, "if I take this approach, they're going to take them away from me for good. There's no chance the courts would let me an' Pep take 'em."

Rhodey's face falls into a pitying smile. It's probably about time to start easing him into the idea...

"Maybe it's for the best Tony."

It's a sentiment to how distraught that single statement made the man when he didn't immediately jump into action and shove him into a wall with a hand tightening around his throat. Instead, his scowl falls into a dejected gape, like he couldn't quite believe his friend would say those words.

"Don't you think it'd be best for them to grow up in a normal, healthy environment where their Dad didn't run a criminal organization and torture people in his spare time?"

Rhodey watches as the man's face slowly reddens in suppressed anger.

"So, you're saying I'd be a bad father?"

"No, I didn't say that Tony. You're already a great father. I just think... after all those kids have been through... I just don't think it's a good idea to feed that trauma. Look at Harley, I mean. He's what? Fourteen? And he..." a humorless chuckle erupts from Rhodey's chest, "the kid wants to be just like you. His only aspiration is to be a criminal, Tony. I don't have kids of my own, but I'm pretty sure they're supposed to wanna be astronauts and doctors... not people like us. He's still a kid and he already knows how to handle a gun... he killed his own mother because Richard pointed a gun at his sisters head."

The redness in Tony's face immediately drained. "He *what*?"

Then it's Rhodey's turn to panic. "*Oh shit.*"

Tony immediately stands from the bed, steadying himself on his shaky legs. "When did you find out about this?"

Rhodey rushes to fix his mistake. "The kid told me about it yesterday morning. I wanted him to tell you what happened first, before you did something-- whoa!" He jumps to the side to block Tony's stumbling path to the door. His face was downturned in a determined scowl, and Rhodey had no doubt he was ready to go tear the Parker bastard limb from limb. "Before you gave Harley a chance to heal," he placated slowly. "Hey, look't me." He grabs Tony's face and makes him lock eyes. "You need to calm down. Let Harley come to you, okay? I think he needs to tell you what happened himself."

"How can you sit around and act like this isn't a big deal. I've been putting this off long enough," he pushes against Rhodey, but the man doesn't budge.

"Believe me, when I listened to what the bastard did, I wanted nothing more than to watch him burn... but there's more important things to think about right now. *You* need to go talk to your SI legal and PR team to try and get all this covered up at court before it gets more out of hand than it already is."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can." Rhodey insists.

“I can’t risk it,” Tony reiterates with a glare.

“Tony, listen. If we do this right, you won’t have to worry about prison. And, heck, if you get arrested, we’ll just bust you out. It’s no big deal. Just c’mon. SI’s gonna plummet if you don’t do this, and so will the organization. If you put it off, it puts the rest of us at risk--”

Rhodey shuts up when he sees the look in his best friend’s eyes. Tony stares at him, head cocked to the side and eyes open wide as if begging for Rhodey to understand. His nostrils are flared, and his jaw is set.

“I can’t give ‘em up.” He whispers under his breath.

And Rhodey understands.

“If I do this... they won’t let me have them back... an-and they’re *my kids*.”

“We’ll find a way,” Rhodey reassures, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder and offering him a small smile. “You’re Tony Stark. Nothing’s ever stood in the way of what you wanted.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading guys and gals. Sorry for a lack of Pete and Harley this chapter, there were just some important things I needed to get out of the way before I got distracted again. This is actually only half the chapter I had originally planned out, so yeah... next chapter will feature more Tony and the kids and also a little Pepper, so stay tuned!

Also, announcement time! I have just recently planned out the tiny details of what all I want to happen and I had to change a few things around. So, because of that, I will be going back to old chapters and tweaking them a bit to fit the story better and to fix any mistakes or characterization errors I may have made. So, if anyone has noticed anything that I might have missed let me know. Literally anything. Maybe some important detail I’ve forgotten to address again, or a scene/event that didn’t really make sense for the story. Also, I’m trying to make sure all the questions I’ve raised in past chapters are answered here pretty soon, so lemme know if things aren’t adding up or making sense.

So, yeah, thanks y’all for accommodating my obsessive OCD self.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Again, sorry for the forever wait.

Here you are though! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So basically... you’re saying that I was right?” Tony questioned with a growl and a pointed raise of his left brow directed towards his wife. His steely and grumpy demeanor from that morning had returned quite quickly after a half hour or so of letting the drug wear off. Now... well now his anxiety was just breeding frustration, and this latest issue was not helping matters whatsoever.

He could practically feel Pepper roll her eyes. They were both stiff and troubled, but they sat on the couch and listened to Bruce’s adamant instructions anyway.

“Yes,” Bruce responds stoically, unamused by Tony’s interruption, “which means you’re going to have to go back to strict bed rest until the baby comes. No more walking around, no more carrying Peter, and most definitely,” Bruce narrows his eyes to get his point across, “no more work.”

Tony gets little to nothing out of the next few minutes of the discussion. He’s too wound up with bitterness to pay any attention. All he could think about was the possibility of losing Morgan before he ever even got her. He’d failed to protect her before he even had a chance to be her father and that sucked. So far, he’d somehow messed up with all three of his kids in a matter of just two days. Maybe he really wasn’t fit to be a father... and that thought just pissed him off even more. He *hated* not being good at things.

He knows Pepper’s probably in no better a mental state than he is, yet she remains poised and calm as she takes all the new rules in stride. Her hands are clasped neatly in her lap and her spine is erect. The arm Tony had draped over her shoulders earlier had fallen limply to the back of the couch when he had slumped into the arm rest, so he inched his hand forward to gently massage the back of her neck to offer comfort. He could feel how tense she was, and he had a feeling she was feeling more than just a little guilty thanks to his stupid comment. Still... he couldn’t help but feel a little irritated with her.

He didn’t realize how tense *he* was, though. Not until he felt Rhodey’s hand land on his shoulder and gently pinch the tense muscles between his shoulder and neck in a light massage. It was a sharp, sudden sting, but it kept him grounded and calm.

Next thing he knows, Bruce is standing from the couch to leave. Tony immediately jumps to his feet in protest; his throat tight and his hands clenched together in tight fists as he glowered at the doctor. “Where the hell you think you’re going?! You gotta stay up here with Pepper.”

Bruce frowns at him, glaring pointedly at the genius’ wobbly legs. Not at all put off by the menacing words. It wasn’t until Rhodey helpfully shoved the butt of his cane into his hand that Bruce graced him with a response. “As much as I would love to stay, sir... you’ve got an army of soldiers downstairs who are seriously injured. I need to dress their wounds... and maybe get a little sleep of my own. I’ll send a nurse up to help Pepper-”

“No,” Tony growls, staggering forward with the cane sloppily slapping the floor with his lack of practice. “No more strangers up here. We still haven’t weeded out the rat. Have the nurses take care of things downstairs. *You* are going to stay up here-”

“Tony,” both Rhodey and Pepper scold him, but Pepper’s stern growl was the one to make him pause, “I’m a grown woman. I think I can take care of myself just fine.”

Tony felt various muscles twitch in irritation. *Was she really this goddamned stupid?!*

He whirled around to settle her with a withering scowl. “So you said the last time. Now look what’s happened.”

He didn’t mean for it to come out so snappish, but it did, and he was too wound up and frustrated to pause and apologize... because what he said was true. He knew better than to let Pepper start watching the news again. He knew better than to let her get involved with their work again. He’d fallen for her sweet-talking manipulative words and now look where they were...

“Tony,” Rhodey steps in once the silence had grown a bit too heavy, “Bruce needs to go and take care of things-”

“This is much more important!” Tony insists with narrowed eyes and a hiss. “My wife and my child are infinitely more important than stitching wounds of men stupid enough to blindly run into battle at my say so.”

“You mean the lives of men who trust you, depend on you, and are loyal to you to the point of putting their own lives at risk to protect your name and your family?” Rhodey snarls. Tony can pinpoint the insulted aggravation in his voice as his best friend straightens to take a defensive stance against him. He instantly recognizes his mistake. His scowl twitches and his glare flickers with a red-rimmed bleakness before he deflates entirely.

He’s tired, stressed, and hurting... he just wanted something to go right for once.

“But, Pepper...-” he tries to argue, only to be interrupted once more.

“Will be fine,” Rhodey insists, face softening alongside his voice. He waves in the general direction Bruce was standing. “Go take care of what you need to before he starts throwing another fit.”

Tony’s glare returns as he watches Bruce leave. “Fine,” he growls, dropping heavily onto the couch beside his stony-faced wife. “If Bruce isn’t staying, then I’ll have to.”

Then, with that simple statement, Rhodey’s frustration was restored. “No,” he placated, as if he were speaking to a child. “You’re going to go talk to your legal team to help me get this mess straightened out.”

“No. I need to stay-”

“You’re going Tony. End of discussion,” Pepper ordered firmly. Tony’s mouth dropped open, desperate to fabricate some fantastical excuse to allow him to stay.

“I know you don’t want to address this Tony,” Rhodey sighs, “but the longer you put it off, the more chance you have of going to prison.”

Tony shakes his head defiantly. “We’ll just take the kids and disappear. We’ll move to Italy or something. They won’t extradite me; they don’t got the balls to throw their main source of security

under the bus. Pep and I can teach the boys how to speak Italian. We'll get a nice little cabin out in the boonies. And we'll change our names. I've got fake identities all lined up for me and Pep; I'll just have to work on the boys..." he's rambling; he knows he is... but everything's just falling apart, and he doesn't know how to handle it. The potential ramifications are becoming clearer the longer he thinks about it and he feels a cold sweat break out and his lungs collapse heavily in his chest.

The man behind Hydra has an MO, and he can't pinpoint it. He doesn't know if the guy is just after his kids, or if he thought it be the perfect opportunity to expose him for something so undeniably "not good". Either way, Hydra was obviously set on separating him from those kids for some god knows reason and that scared the shit out of him.

He feels Pepper's soft hand wrap around his and for a second he lets himself marvel at the fact that Pepper loved him enough to comfort him even after he had been a major prick. "Tony, it's okay. This isn't something we haven't dealt with before."

Tony twists, wincing as his ribs groan in protest, he grabs Pepper's hands and grasps them tightly in his as he stares into her eyes. She looks upset and he hates to make it worse, but he's terrified, and he doesn't have anybody to trust but her and Rhodes.

"Pep... honey," he whispers softly, "if I do this there's no way we'd be able to keep 'em without turning some very influential heads. Ross and whoever else is after our kids are going to do everything they can to take them away. We'd have to fight back... and if we do, we'd lose the little support we got here... it'll all be game over. We can say bye-bye to our money and our lives and say hello to a maximum-security prison right next door to Ryker's island. Any tiny public allegation will give Ross all he needs to make this all go away and give Hydra the bump it needs to revolt. We either uproot or hand over the kids..."

He witnesses the moment it hits her. Her eyes tear up and her hold on Tony's hands tighten. "No." She shakes her head and Tony bites his lip. If only the world would listen if he uttered that word. It used to, but he wasn't so sure it would be enough this time around.

"And even if we uproot and shut this whole operation down... Hydra won't stop. They've got us pitted in a corner and they're too powerful for us to stop by ourselves. Either way we'd be losing the kids." His voice wavered with the words. The more he spoke the more he realized the implications this tiny problem created. The government would shut SI down for illicit activities and they'd have to downsize to Europe... leaving the most powerful country on the globe in the hands of Nazis... he didn't see any good options anymore.

If his family wasn't at risk, he'd give kudos to the man who thought out this plan... it was a dirty play; one that reminded him a bit too much of his father's go-to strategies.

"Tones," Rhodey hisses in warning, "you're not supposed to be stressing her out."

Tony turns to look at him over his shoulder and growls. "Well, it would be much worse if I didn't warn her about it and then a week later the government's carting off our kids while I rot out in a prison more secure than Fort Knox two weeks before my scheduled execution."

Tony's harsh words are followed by a resounding crash from the hallway and frantic footsteps fleeing the scene. All three heads snap in the direction of the hall. Pepper lifts a shaky hand to her mouth and squeezes her eyes shut as a tearful gasp escapes her. Tony bounces to his feet, crying out with a quiet groan when his bad knee immediately collapsed in protest after one too many times of careless movements.

“Kid?” He calls out instead, falling back into the couch with a hand clasped tightly over the aching joint.

When there was no answer given to his call, Rhodey took it upon himself to investigate. He disappeared around the corner, slipping into the hall, and Tony finds his gut twisting painfully. He wraps his arm around Pepper and pulls her closer as tears quietly slip down her cheeks. He wished his life didn’t have to always be so complicated. He wished his wife didn’t have to worry about him. And he wished his kids had the opportunity to be normal... but that was wishful thinking, and wishful thinking wasn’t realistic.

“What if we adopt them before court?” Pepper whispers hopefully.

Tony holds her tighter. He knows she knows that won’t work. Heck, Pepper could lead the legal team if she had the desire... “I don’t think so, hon. It was already gonna be tough even with the money we got... but now that they have undeniable evidence and-and they know I’ve been housing them this long. Then Harley ran and I had to fetch him... that’s not a good look on our situation. It’s too public. Rhodey thinks we’d have a chance in court if we didn’t insist on keeping the boys... but I-I don’t wanna pit ‘em off when they could be used against me.”

Then, Rhodey emerges from the hall with Harley trailing behind him, head bowed to stare at the ground, and hands clasped tightly in front of him in a stance mimicking a submissive servant from the 1800s.

Tony sits up straighter as they approach, prepping himself to have a serious conversation about what the kid had just overheard.

“Listen, kid-”

“It’s my fault... isn’t it?” Harley croaks, lifting his head to look at both Tony and Pepper. Tony’s mouth falls open to protest the statement, but Pepper beats him to it. Her arm lifts and she reaches out to tug Harley towards her.

“Of course not, sweetheart,” she soothes. Harley drops onto the couch next to her, looking very much like the child he tries to deny he is, and tucks himself close. Pepper’s hand lifts to comb through his hair and his face presses closer to her neck as she hums quietly to fill the silence of the room.

“I’m just so sorry for everything,” Harley whispers. “I-I-I didn’t mean to get Tony hurt and-and I’m sorry for stressing you out so much, and I’m sorry for almost being the reason Hydra’s gonna take over the world, and-and I’m just-- I’m just sorry.”

Tony feels an odd sensation jolt across his skin that is scarily similar to a persistent itch, and his fingers cramp. Rhodey casts him a pitying look as he stirs quietly at his place beside Pepper, opposite of the kid.

Eventually he finds enough courage to use his arm wrapped around Pepper’s shoulders to twist and graze the tips of his fingers over the kid’s unruly hair... It was a lot like Peter’s hair, he notices.

Pepper’s fingers continue combing through the curly locks and Tony drops his hand further to brush his fingertips against the skin along the back of the kid’s neck. He wasn’t sure if it was *his* skin that prickled, or the kid’s, but either way the sensation didn’t deter him. He laid his cheek on Pepper’s shoulder and slowly let his hand wander up into the hair on the nape of Harley’s neck. His fingers spread slightly to allow the long curls to pass through as his blunt nails gently scratch at the kid’s scalp.

After a moment, he realizes what he was doing, and he recoils his hand. He was intruding on an intimate moment between Harley and Pepper... he was-- he shouldn't be involved.

"Nothing is your fault. We'll figure this out, okay?" He hears Pepper whisper after pressing a kiss to his head... and then Tony was brought back down from his incriminating thoughts. And he finds some patch of untouched determination boiling in his stomach and he finds a burning sense of power seize his muscles... *he was going to fix this.*

Whatever it takes.

Harley's arms tighten around Pepper's waist, being careful of her baby bump. "I-I... I'm willing to testify whatever it takes to make sure Pete stays with you. I'll-I'll take all the blame--"

Such a good kid... such a good brother.

"Not happening kiddo," Tony rasps, his other hand awkwardly flopping towards Pepper so he can grab the kid's hand and squeeze it tightly. "Either we figure out a way to stay together or we'll leave, alright. I don't leave my best guys behind. Don't care if the world ends up going up in flames or not... we stick together. I'll set fire to the world myself if I have to."

"That's right," Pepper agrees, "you're just as much ours as Peter is--" she cuts herself off abruptly and snaps her head to the side to stare at her husband. "I-I just remembered something."

Tony recognizes the look in her eyes and that same boiling determination consumes him. Every muscle in him tenses as the flames lick up and down his body. "What is it?"

"What if they were proven to be ours?"

Harley pulls away from the embrace slowly to stare at her, and both Tony and Rhodey share an uncertain look.

"What do you mean Hon?"

Pepper wants to snap at him for being dense, but instead she exhales slowly and reaches out to hold onto Harley's shirt when she felt the boy begin scooting away. She wasn't about to let him escape so easy this time. "When you were dealing with the security breach I was on the phone with legal, talking about the different options to cover up these kidnapping claims. Our go to had been so simply forge old adoption certificates, but with how closely they've been monitoring you the past few years I don't think two fraudulent adoptions slipping past them will bode well with the courts. But if we talk to the right people, we can manipulate a blood test to claim the boys as our own. And we can get the papers just as easily as the adoption papers. Harley of course would have to go down as a year younger than he is to corroborate with our backstories, but it could work."

"Thirteen?" Harley immediately protested, disgusted with the idea of having to give up another year until adulthood. That just gave Tony more incentive to put off his intensive training for another year.

"Hang on, kid," Tony commands, holding up a hand as he fixes his serious 'I'm gonna fix this' gaze onto Pepper. "How can we claim that when the world already knows about Pete being a Parker. And what about Harley's family? All a person needs is a computer and an ounce of common sense to figure it out."

Pepper nods because of course she thought of it all. "It would be easy enough to claim that we handed over Harley to be cared for by a trusted friend, because our life and our relationship at the time hadn't been stable and didn't agree with a child. The documentation for a transfer in

guardianship would be easy enough to fake; we have people for that. And we claim we had cut ties, to try and move on from having to give up our child, and once we found out his mother had passed..." she squeezed Harley's hand gently, "we decided to take him back in, but refrained from doing so publicly to protect him from the trouble he'd gotten into with Oscorp." Tony nods along, face hardening once more. "And with Pete, all we have to do is expose Richard's unethical testing he had done and claim he had kidnapped our son in retaliation to our success, but we hadn't filed a report because we didn't want to risk the publicity it would bring and the danger that would follow it. It'd be a start to an end of Oscorp which means an end to Hydra's supply of bio-weapons. Two birds; one stone." She pauses and glanced nervously between Rhodey and her husband. "I think it might work... what do you two think?"

Tony's hand lifts to his face and he slowly rubs his eyes as he processed. Rhodey, though, he nodded vigorously, a resolute grin on his face.

Then a grin fixed itself on Tony's face as well and he laughed at the absurdity of it all. Loud and hearty with his head thrown back and his eyes watering with tears. His wife was a force to be reckoned with. A swindling, deceitful businesswoman by all counts and he *loved* it. He knew he married her for a reason.

"I think, if we do it right... we might be able to pull it off."

Pepper smiles, pursing her lips to control the tears.

Harley remains silent and Tony notices and he feels a sense of dread fall over him. So, he purses his lips for a moment before dropping his head to stare at his lap.

But then he lifts his head and fixes his gaze on the boy sitting opposite his wife once more. He braces his elbows on his knees as he leans forward and he nods his head slowly. "We'll do that for Peter..." he trails off, watching Harley's face carefully. The kid's neutral face fell into crumpled frown and Pepper immediately began throwing a fit, but Tony cut her off. "--and I'd love to do the same with Harley. I wouldn't want anything more than to keep him here with us," he keeps his gaze fixed with Harley, "*but* I think he deserves a say in what happens this time."

Harley gulps, nostrils flaring. "I-I-I um..." He squeezes Pepper's hand.

"This would be a permanent solution kid... you'd be a Stark. Things are gonna change and you're gonna get a lot of attention; more bad than good. And I don't want you resenting us for trying to take the place of your family. But just realize... if we don't do this... you're going to have to leave the country, and you won't ever be able to come back. I-I'd give you plenty of money to help you get by for the rest of your life just about and I'll send a few guys to watch your back, but... we'd have to cut ties completely. I just want you to think about it--"

"I-I mean... I'm not gonna be a huge fan of being thirteen again, but I think it's by far the best option!" Harley blurts immediately. The boy isn't sure if it's the prospect of leaving New York and being all on his own, or if it was leaving the family he'd found... Hell, he knew exactly which one it was... but he still wasn't ballsy enough to admit it yet. Not even after all that has happened and all the icky emotional confessions.

As soon as the words left his mouth, he quickly pulled himself away from Pepper to put some distance between himself and the couple next to him. He stared down at the hands clasped in his lap.

"Good," Tony nods, sitting up straighter. "I'll have FRIDAY send a list of instructions down to legal and I'll start making a few calls. I'm not comfortable leaving you up here by yourself right

now Pepper so I'll stay up here for today."

That's when the arguing began. The couple go back and forth, voices raising and points becoming quite outlandish. Even Rhodey seemed to have an opinion that needed to be voiced. Things started to escalate for a moment, but Harley jumped from the couch a bit too eagerly before it could. "I can stay back with Mom."

The entire room fell silent and for a short moment Harley feels smug with the way he was able to silence three of the most powerful adults in the world by simply speaking... but then realizes what he said and he pales, immediately backtracking with stutters and excuses.

"I-I-I uh meant, actually, um-- I meant Pepp-- well I mean, it's good to get into character, uh, right? Y'know... so I can, like... um get used to it?"

Tony fights off his amused smirk and the giddy warmth in his chest with a cough, and he tries saving the kid some embarrassment by playing along. Pepper, though, she looked on the verge of a breaking down into happy tears.

"Makes sense. You do you, kid."

Harley nods stiffly, eyes still blown wide and shoulders stiff as he fought to look nonchalant. "But, um... yeah. I can just stay here--"

"No," Tony shakes his head. "You're going downstairs with Rhodey to help fix this mess and brainstorm the best way of addressing these threats with the Club Heads and get everything running smoothly." Then Tony turns to Rhodey with a meaningful nod of his head towards Harley and a look in his eyes. "Don't let 'im take any crap from anybody. He's gotta learn."

Rhodey nods his head. "How would you like the work split?"

Tony rubs his head in thought, eyes squeezing closed and teeth gritting together with a short hiss. "Put Hogan and Romanoff in charge of the new guys. I want each one tested and questioned with Bruce's safe new knockoff of Oscorp's narcoanalytic drug. I don't want anybody walking around by themselves until they've been given a direct all clear from Hogan, you, or myself... have Wilson sit in with them. He used to be a shrink... he might have a few tricks up his sleeve. And I want Coulson and his soldiers on floor 15 and lock it down. If they'd like to leave the Tower for good, by all means let 'em go, but I do not want them coming back or wandering around my building unattended with all this going on." Rhodey voices his agreement with a grunt. "As for you... I want you to contact Rogers again; make sure things are going straight and find out if there's any word from Barnes about Ross. As far as I'm concerned, that bastard's the real Hydra-man and he's just trying to knock us off his trail. So, I want you to start building up a strike team and have them ready by the end of the week in case Ross or Hydra decides to attack. You're already transferring the weapons and such offsite, correct?"

Rhodey nods.

"Good. I want at least 20 guys at the warehouse at all times--"

"Make sure they grab my art collection down in the basement," Pepper chimes in helpfully.

"Yes, and Pepper's art collection. And maybe have one of our SI trainers lead an assembly for the new guys. They need to know how to act as legitimate employees, and what they're place is, in case the Tower's raided. Also, give a quick reminder to the Omerta oath. Some of these new guys aren't quite as acquainted with the rules as they should be, and they need to be ready in case

Rogers and his guys get booted.”

“Is that all?”

Tony’s eyes crinkle in contemplation. “Well, in case I can’t get JARVIS up and running again tonight, I’ll need you to check in with our Italian factions and have them prep my mansion in Venice and get one of my new stealth jets ready. That’s all I can think of off the top of my head. Do whatever else you feel is necessary though; it’s possible I could have missed something.”

“Great,” Rhodey nods affirmatively, standing from his perch on one of the kitchen stools. He juts his chin at Harley and nods towards the elevator. “Let’s go kid.”

Harley leaps forward after him, eager to please. He pauses in the elevator though when he hears Tony call out to him. “No wandering kid. Stick to Rhodey.”

Harley nods without a word and the doors close.

As soon as they’re gone, Tony pivots his waist to face Pepper. As much as he wants to finalize everything with legal, he knows they’d be able to work through the job without his direct insight. All they’d need were instructions and the rest would be history. If he went down there personally, he’d be roped into every legal debate that needs to be handled and he’s just really not in the mood.

“I’m gonna stay here--”

“No,” Pepper growls, “You’re going.”

“Pepper I’m not going to leave you up here by yourself--”

“Anthony Edward Stark you better get your ass down to Legal right now and fix this mess before I get up and do it myself. Is that what you want?” She settles him with a scathing glare.

Tony does his best to return the glare, but he’d never been particularly good at arguing with Pepper. He deflates, shaking his head in abject amusement at his own powerlessness when it came to his wife.

“Good,” Pepper hummed, chin in the air as she looked downwards at him, rubbing a hand over her stomach, “I have adoption papers filled out in our rooms. Take those down to legal and have them start working with the latest information. Then have your Scott guy do the identities please and get in contact with Helen and have her handle the blood tests.”

Tony chuckles. “Yes ma’am.” He stands from the couch and slowly trudges towards their room down the hall to retrieve the papers Pepper had been speaking of.

“Sir, how do you propose we introduce this to the courts and the public?”

Tony twines his fingers together and settles the man across the table with a stern glare. “I believe that’s actually your job Mr. Meyers.” He’s so ready for this to be over. It’s important, yes, but it seemed they were just talking in circles by this point. None of these Harvard summa cum laude idiots seemed to know what they were doing. He didn’t know if they were nervous or what, but Pepper was the one to always interact with them and she swore by their intelligence and creativity... he’s yet to see proof of that.

His knee began to bounce rapidly beneath the table, and he grit his teeth together to quell his

irritation.

The man stutters helplessly, glancing around the long table at his compatriots for any help, but none offer any to him. They all seemed to be scared shitless and typically Tony would preen at the thought, but right now he was just pissed. He knew he should have just stayed upstairs with Pepper.

“W-well um, Mr. Stark. I believe it would be best to make a public statement. You’ve been trying to avoid attention ever since SI has cut off their deal with the U.S. government and people are beginning to question if you’ve suffered a mental break. That way the announcement could not be altered in any way when reports came from the courts.”

Tony didn’t let his internal shudder show. “So... a press conference?”

A grey-haired, somber woman spoke up next. “I don’t believe that wouldn’t be wise, sir. That would allow opportunity for a public arrest and we’d like to avoid that at all costs.”

Tony narrows his eyes and leans as far forward as his sore body would allow. “So, what are you suggesting I do then?”

This just might have gotten a little interesting... but he won’t admit it.

“Well... sir, a live broadcast may do the trick--”

“You mean like the one Hydra-man pulled on everyone?”

The woman’s head bobs up and down and Tony finds a wide grin splitting across his face. He doesn’t know why, but the thought of stealing the man’s idea makes him giddy. Maybe all these over-paid idiots weren’t total quacks after all.

“It would be a quick and straightforward way to claim your relations to the two boys and calm the rumors before they get too out of hand with the general public.”

Tony nods and stands from his chair, eyes glinting with mischief. The potential was endless. He opens his mouth to voice his undying approval, but he’s interrupted by the door being thrown open by a screaming toddler and a frustrated young man. Allen had his grip on the back of the boy’s shirt as the demon-child screamed at him, red in the face, as he twisted his body in every direction so fervently that he had somehow ended up tangled in the fabric of his shirt. Allen didn’t seem all that amused with the dramatics.

“Sir, Mrs. Stark wished you to babysit Peter. She said she needs to rest, and that Peter is being particularly grumpy this morning.”

Peter twists to look up at the man with the hold on him. “IIII NOT GRUMMMMPYYY!” He screeches, mouth wide open and pale face a bright red. The kid immediately returns to his frantic thrashing.

After Tony gets over his initial shock, he grits his teeth together and glances around the room of baffled lawyers. “Peter!” He hissed, nostrils flaring in anger as he stormed away from the table to approach the pair of newest arrivals.

Peter only screamed louder, throwing his head back to release a particularly high-pitched shriek.

Allen releases his shirt just as Tony grabs him, picking him up and holding tight as he struggled to keep the fighting toddler in his arms. It killed his knee and his ribs weren’t so happy, but he

clamped a hand over the boy's open mouth anyways and fixed him with a stern glare as he made his way outside the meeting room and into the deserted hallway for some privacy.

Peter screamed from behind his hand, and Tony wasn't having it. He used the arm holding him to clap him sharply on his thigh. Not enough to hurt, but enough to jolt him out of his angry tirade of screams. It worked and Peter stopped instantly to fix the man with a look like he couldn't quite believe the man had smacked him.

"Peter," Tony spoke sternly, "you know better than that. You can't be screaming like that just because you're in a bad mood, understand?"

Peter's tiny lips curl into a hateful snarl and he shoves Tony's shoulder, but it does nothing but piss Tony off even more. Before Peter could start up his screaming again, he looks around in search of a place to sit before his knee gives out and they both end up on the floor. He finds a seat, sits down and places Peter in his lap.

The kid immediately starts trying to climb away and when Tony's hold on him only tightens he screams, loud and shrill. Tony winces and Peter's almost able struggle out of his hold, but he grits his teeth and takes a firm hold of the boy from beneath the arms and lifts him to place him back down on his lap firmly. "No, none of that. Look at me." He grabs the boy's chin and tugged roughly to force the boy's eyes to settle onto him.

He'd never had to get rough with Peter 'cause the kid had always been so good...

Peter tugged his head away from Tony and turned to fix his gaze on a wall to the right of them stubbornly. He crossed his tiny arms over his chest and hmphed.

At least he'd stopped screaming.

"Peter," Tony tried again with a softer voice and an exasperated sigh. He didn't want to make matters worse when he and the kid were already on such rough terms. "C'mon Bubba, tell me what's wrong."

Peter's chin only lifted defiantly, and his little nose twitched.

Tony sighed again and slumped slightly in his chair.

"I wan' Mama," Peter eventually grunted without sparing a glance towards Tony.

Tony rolled his eyes, because *of course*. He remembered when *he* used to be the favorite.

"Well Mama's not feeling so great right now, so why don't you hang out with me for a while, hm? You used to love it remember," he nudged the little boy's side slightly and Peter only wiggles away, keeping his gaze fixed on the wall and his arms firmly crossed over his chest.

Tony rolled his eyes at the kid's theatrics. It was kinda cute if he was being totally honest. He found the corner of his mouth beginning to quirk up and he had to bite down on a chuckle. It reminded him of those funny videos Pepper would make him watch all the time of little kids being total grumps to their parents for some absurd reason. He just wished that the kid was mad at him for an absurd reason instead of a perfectly reasonable one.

Then he realized the kid was sitting with him without screaming his goddamn mind out, so that must be progress, right?

Then he got this weird ticklish feeling in his chest like someone had grabbed his heart, tied it to a

balloon, and now it was floating in the sky. He felt giddy and tingly and he didn't know if it was the prospect of Peter forgiving him, or the relief of everything slowly being worked out.

He doesn't know what overcame him, but he poked the kid again, right where he knew Peter was most ticklish.

Just as he predicted, the child released a joyful screech and writhed away. Tony poked him again, and again, and again as his grin grew wider, and wider, and wider. "See I knew my happy little boy was in there somewhere," Tony crooned with a muffled voice as the boy swatted at his hands with shrieks and belly laughs falling from his beaming mouth. "I knew tickles were your weakness," he continued, pulling the boy closer to assault both sides with tickles and blow a big raspberry against his cheek.

"Stoooooop!" Peter squealed with delight; pudgy hands placed on either of Tony's cheeks to shove his face away as the man pressed prickly kisses across his face. "Daddy stop!"

Tony grins so wide he isn't able to continue his onslaught on the boy's face, so he drops his head further and Peter's shoulder rises to his neck with a high-pitched squeal as he attempts to protect his sensitive skin from Tony's prickly beard as the man blows another raspberry against his sensitive neck.

He pulls away and allows his kid's laughing to peter down into breathless giggles. "See," Tony preened proudly, "I knew you still liked me."

Despite his smugness, he felt an immense amount of relief knowing that not all hope was lost where it came to Peter. And if he was being honest, he sorta missed the hugs. Like... he really missed the hugs. And the kisses. He totally missed the kisses. And the early morning wake ups? Gosh... he missed those too. Granted, it's only been a couple days, but still! He just wanted things to go back to the way they were.

Sadly, though, at the reminder that he had been mad at the man, Peter turned away and stubbornly returned to his pouting, indignant gaze immediately returning to the wall.

The actions didn't deter the man though, and instead he chuckled and rolled his eyes, gently lifting the boy off his lap and lowering him back to the ground. "Alright enough glowering. I get it. I'm the worst human being on the planet." Peter doesn't grace him with a response.

Tony shook his head in exasperation and readied himself to stand with each hand braced on either arm of the chair. He grimaced as he stood to his feet, immediately cursing himself for so stupidly forgetting his cane in the meeting room while he rushed out. Peter must have heard his sharp hiss because the boy's upper half slowly twisted around to glance up at him with big worried eyes that quickly reverted into his menacing pout once Tony glanced down at him.

"You 'kay?" His brows remained furrowed, but Tony couldn't help but find his masked concern humorous.

"Yeah, Bug. Dad's just got a bum knee."

The furrow in Peter's brows disappeared and his stern glower melted into worried concern. "Cuz-cuz you got hurted savin' Ha'ley?"

Tony nodded with a chuffed sigh, leaning most of his weight on his good leg. Heck, he needed to stop taking dives out of car windows. He wasn't that young anymore.

He limped forward several steps, having faith that Peter would follow him despite his abnormally

sour mood. But instead of grumpily stomping along behind him like he had expected, Peter uncrosses his arms slowly and approaches Tony with a wrinkled nose and a contemplative downturn of his mouth. He reached out and grabbed Tony's hand gently, then tucking close to his side to place the man's hand on his opposite shoulder and stretching to wrap his own tiny arm around the man's waist as if he were planning to support his weight. "I help you then."

Tony pressed his lips together to try and contain his laughter.

"Thanks kiddo."

Steve tugs on the collar of his trench coat and pulls down on his cap to avoid the onslaught of rain pouring from the greying winter sky. He grumbles under his breath as he plods along with the crowd of New Yorkers through Time Square, trampling through puddles of dirty water and passing by beggars taking shelter beneath storefront canopies only to be shooed off by the grumpy business owners.

He loves New York; he really does. Sometimes it's just a bit *too* much though.

He gets clipped in the shoulder more than once as he walks, which only seems to spur his frustration. He spent an entire morning trying to clean up Tony Stark's mess, then he spent an entire afternoon getting chewed out by the Commissioner. Apparently, even though Hydra hadn't been able to prove his affiliation with Stark, it was still a bad look. So now the FBI is taking over all the cases involving Stark and Rhodes was beyond pissed with him about it. *As if there was something he could do!* It wasn't his fault Hydra tried to discredit him on live television. And of course! Lo and Behold! He's now got a chaperone until everything gets cleared up. And of course, the man they picked for the job was none other than his crackhead of a lieutenant Ben Reilly.

Either way he had plans to speak with Bucky about it later that night because goodness knows he needs to vent to somebody.

Something about the man's sickly eagerness made his spine tingle.

Either way, Steve was glad to get out of the stuffy precinct and go home for the day. He let his frustration be washed over with the relaxing thoughts of kicking back on the sofa and sketching in his notebook as he watched the evening news. Maybe even brew a nice pot of tea as well.

The flashing lights from the neon-esque billboards ahead and the honking of horns disrupting the heavy chatter of people as they talked on their phones. It all gave him a headache.

He just needed to grab his dry cleaning so he could hail a taxi and go home. But of course, as always, he was interrupted by Tony Stark's insistence for attention.

Crowds of people were stopping and screaming, pointing up at the large screens littering the sides of buildings. Cars stopped and people stepped out into the streets to stare up at the monitors illuminated with the wide smirk of Tony Stark. Steve groaned and pressed a hand to his face.

He should have never told Stark to keep his head low. He should have known better than that.

"Hello New York!" He greeted, throwing his arms in the air.

The usual hustle and bustle of New York froze. Steve's never heard it so quiet.

"And I believe we'll be welcoming Japan here soon-- oh! There you are." The man's attention

was directed to the left of the screen. **“Oh hello,”** his voice rose to a playful pitch, **“looks like we’ve got Hong Kong too. Hey there guys.”** His smirk only seemed to grow the more he spoke. **“I think we’re waiting on a couple more before we officially start. My tech guy is runnin’ kinda slow this evening, so bear with me please.”**

Laughter rippled over the crowd, but Steve couldn’t help but roll his eyes. Only Tony Stark would treat hacking and broadcasting onto every private TV screen from NY to Japan as a Facebook Live.

“Alright there we go,” Tony looked back at the camera with a smile, then looked off to the side again, **“I think that’s everyone, so... Hello World! In case you didn’t know—heck who am I kidding, you all know I’m Tony Stark. Just felt the need to clear a few things up, y’know, about what happened a couple mornings ago. And I got a timer,”** he reaches over to grab a clock counting down from 4:32. **“My dearest wife told me I couldn’t go overboard and gave me a five minute time limit, ‘cause apparently people got things to do and whatever. So, I won’t be taking up too much of your time.”** He rolled his eyes and put the clock back to wherever he had grabbed it offscreen. **“Anywho, first things first, those two kids you saw... yeah, those are my kids. Peter and Harley. Apparently, people think I kidnapped them... so just a quick clarification: we did not. Kidnap them, that is. Those two are our pride and joy and we’re about to have another one, as you saw, to make it an official trio. We’re very excited. And if we’re being honest here, technically we *did* kidnap Pete back from his kidnapper Richard Parker, but that’s a moot point that will eventually be addressed in court at a later time.”** He shot a pointed look at the camera and leaned back.

“And speaking of court... just wanted to let whoever needs to know, know, that I’ll be outta town for about a month or so. My family needs a break. Too stressful here in New York, so--” there’s a soft crash that startles Tony from his spiel and he twists his body to point it in the general direction the noise came from. Then there’s a bit of mumbling and Tony smiles away from the camera as he speaks. **“Daddy’s workin’ Buddy,”** he mumbles, head and shoulders leaning out of frame as he spoke to who Steve assumed to be Peter, **“I’ll be in soon. Go find Mama.”**

Then with that he’s back in frame, grinning like a smug doofus. **“Where was I-- Oh yes! About court. I was thinking June 3rd would be a good date for me and my schedule. So long as the feds stay out of my business for the next month, things’ll go smoothly. So, that means don’t come a’snoppin’ without my permission or else you can kiss my cooperation goodbye. So, just behave and we’ll finally get to have that little hearing Ross, how’s that sound buddy?”**

“As for Mr. Hydra-man,” his voice grows stern and his head lowers and cocks to the side to look up at the camera with a threatening glare. **“I’m not overly fond of you threatening my family. You’ve caused quite the ruckus here at home and I’m not happy about it. So! Just a fair warning, stay out of my way, stay away from my family, and stay out of my city. You may think you got the upper hand, but just keep in mind that I’m always ten steps ahead.”** His chin lifted and a sadistic smirk spread across his face. **“So maybe rethink going against me next time, or at least be ballsy enough to actually show your face.”**

With that statement, all the screens projecting the man’s own smirking face went black, flickered, and returned to whatever advertisement had been displayed upon it before.

Steve’s jaw went slack, as did just about everyone else’s as they stared up at the screens. Then he quickly shook himself out of it and grabbed for his phone, releasing a hissed growl of frustration as he thumbs in the familiar number once more.

“I’m gonna kill that man, I swear. All he does is make my life a living hell.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed that. A lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into this one. It's like pulling teeth I swear.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

And here's what you've all been patiently waiting for.

Let the fluff commence!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I can’t *BELIEVE* this!” The man roared, slamming his fist on his desktop as bourbon splashed over the edge of the whiskey glass in his other hand. The wide TV that had once been illuminated across the room was momentarily cut to black before returning to the old-western he’d been watching before Stark’s surprise interruption appeared on screen.

“Sir,” a timid young man standing idly beside his desk spoke, “would you care for me to contact Ross for you?”

The man was barely able to finish his inquiry before the sound of a loud BANG sounded through the room and he fell to the floor. A clean hole pierced his forehead, accentuated by the drips of crimson blood contrasting against his pale skin. The man behind the desk remained unbothered as he slowly lowered his revolver against the expensive wood of his desk once more and tipped back the last sip of whiskey into his mouth. He sneered, nose wrinkling, and teeth bared as the sharp burn from the large swig burned his throat, and he sighed as if the weight of the world had become too cumbersome to rest on his soldiers any longer.

He glanced for only a moment at the lifeless body on his luxury carpet and the small pool of blood that was beginning to gather on the expensive fabric. He narrowed his eyes and reached forward to press for a call on his phone.

“Joss,” he summoned, “I need you.” He growled in annoyance once more and reached for the stained-glass bottle on his desk to pour himself another couple fingers.

The man summoned gracefully rushed into the room only a minute later, hands clasped behind his back and chin in the air as he waits to be spoken to. He hardly casts a glance to the body crumpled on the floor and he didn’t dare question it.

“A couple things,” The man says. Then he waves in the general direction of the corpse and takes a sip of his newly refilled glass. “Take care of him, then call for another retainer boy to take his place.”

Joss nods in compliance. “Of course, sir. May I ask what this one did to avoid future mishaps?”

The man in question hums noncommittally and spins slightly in his chair to face his black and white western once more, his once irritated frown replaced with the indifferent line of his lips. “He spoke without consent. Quite the nuisance, really... which reminds me... get in contact with Ross, I’d like to speak with him about Anthony’s latest announcement.”

“Right away, sir.”

“Peter! Stop struggling. I’m not going to let go of your hand so you’re just gonna have to deal with it.” Tony tightened his grip on the kid’s hand. “We have to pick up Harley then we can go upstairs to see Mama and eat some dinner.” He stared ahead at the elevator doors as the lift slowly descended to the main room floor where Rhodey typically spent his time, and by extension, where Harley most likely was. Peter continued whining and trying to pry the man’s fingers from around his wrist and Tony could *feel* himself losing his patience. The kid had done fairly good after his little episode that morning. He’d been a grump, of course, for the rest of the day, but at least he wasn’t screaming his head off anymore.

Allen had fetched him a coloring book and the kid had sat, content, in the chair beside Tony as the man continued the meeting with his lawyers and later, PR. At some moments the kid would seem to forget he was supposed to be upset and he’d reach out to Tony for help or to request something only to pause abruptly as if he’d just remembered, then scowl and act as if he’d hated the man all along. Tony didn’t know if it was just an off day for the kid, or what. With the lack of screaming being replaced with mild distaste and seemingly very selective moments of independence, Tony was fairly certain the kid was only still mad at him because of his own toddler stubbornness. So, the kid probably just needed some time, and a nap too perhaps. A good nap is probably what he *really* needed. Either way, Tony was getting a little fed up with the theatrics.

“Would you rather me carry you? It’s either hold my hand or be carried, kid. Your choice.”

A couple days ago, there would have been no question. Peter would’ve been jumping at his feet hours ago with his arms extended and lip juttied out in a pout, begging to be picked up and snuggled. But it wasn’t a couple days ago... It was today. And *today*, the kid was going through some sort of drastic mood swing that he humbly took partial fault for.

Peter’s nose wrinkled as he turned his head up to glare at the man looking down at him, but he stopped his struggling.

“That’s what I thought,” Tony grumbled with the hint of a triumphant smile peeking through. He hated to admit it, but he’s fairly sure he’s starting to get a handle on this whole “parenting” business. There had been no outburst; from him or the kid during the exchange, and it had all been handled in a calm yet firm manner. If anything, he’s pretty sure this whole day has just about prepared him for anything... on the tantrum front at least.

So, he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. He reminded himself continuously that everything was slowly falling into place and there was no reason for him to feel stressed or angry. Everything was going to be fine. And with that final thought he was able to release the tension in his shoulders and lean more heavily against his cane as he waited for the doors to open with a newfound patience.

Peter was still brooding by the time their descent stopped and they were exiting the elevator. Tony isn’t distracted by the attitude much longer, because the commotion breaking out across the open room draws his attention instead.

The loud chanting, hoots, and hollering is followed by a distinct shattering, and Tony picks up his pace immediately. All he can see is the backs of the group gathered near the community kitchen and he wanted to know what was causing such a noisy distraction to his men during such a time where each and every one of them should be working in one way or another.

Peter stumbles along beside him, trying to keep up with his long strides as they approach the outskirts of the decent sized crowd.

Tony almost has to do a double take when he finds who was drawing all the attention. Harley was

standing on top the counter with a long plastic launcher tucked to his shoulder. A wide, shit-eating grin spread across his youthful face as he raised his hand towards the crowd in a wide gesture.

“Throw another!” He commanded with a smug smirk and at that moment Tony just had so many questions. One, what the hell was that thing the kid was holding? And two, since when did his angsty, reserved teenage kid enjoy being the center of attention. Before Tony had proper time to process those two, a pristine white plate went throttling into the air and another entire realm of questions assaulted him.

Harley shoulders the tube, aims, and fires all in the course of a couple seconds. A large brown blur is ejected from the launcher, shattering the plate into tiny pieces as it rained down on the crowd. The lump continues flying though, and hits the wall with a loud thump, and it isn’t until it slowly bounces along the floor that Tony identifies it as a potato.

The kid had a potato launcher... Tony didn’t know what to feel.

Peter points to it with a curious cock to his head. “Is that potato?”

“Yep,” Tony deadpanned. He wasn’t sure what his reaction to this situation should be. Should he be concerned the kid had somehow either smuggled a potato gun from the outside or built it himself? Should he be angry the kid was distracting his men from doing their jobs? Or should he be goddamned proud that his kid had such good aim and the Stark flair for attention and dramatics? He supposed he spoke too soon when he said he had a handle on this ‘parenting’ thing.

He staggered just a bit as he reached down to scoop up Peter while he was distracted and before the boy had a moment to properly process the action and throw a fit. Tony steadied himself with his cane and began shouldering his way through the crowd, not bothering to avoid whacking some of the guys’ shins with his cane as he pushed through. “Outta my way!” He shouted. At the sound of his voice, the entire crowd seemed to rise to attention, and they parted like the Red Sea did for Moses. He still wasn’t sure if he should be angry or proud and he supposed he should figure it out fast because he was almost to the kid.

He thinks he might be angry.

He wasn’t angry at Harley; not at all. Heck, if it weren’t for the crap-ton of work that needed to get done he’d probably be celebrating and shouting alongside everyone else. He’d never been one to *not* enjoy some harmless destruction. Nope, he was mad for two reasons. One... where the *hell* was Rhodey? He was supposed to be watching the kid, and he’s quite sure that this scene right here didn’t constitute as “watching the kid” (Happy, by far, was a much better babysitter apparently. Tony’d have to keep that in mind). Two, there was work to be done! There was so much shit that needed to be taken care of and all these idiots were standing around, chanting and hollering as some kid fired potatoes at expensive dinner plates!

Stockpiles of drugs and weapons needed to be transferred to the warehouse upstate before the Feds throw Steve off the case and get involved. Those Feds are sure to jump at the opportunity to take him down by any means. They’ve been biting at the bullet since SI ended their military contracts, and he doubts they’ll wait more than a day. Which means he needs to get on top of streaming that video and set some ground rules for them before they decided to come busting in and ruin all his plans. But his tech guys need to get a handle on everything and he needs to fix up JARVIS before they could even think about taking the risk of spreading him so thin by hacking into every country at once... and that just added to his long to-do list of things in need of doing ASAP.

He needed eyes on the streets 24/7 too. JARVIS was down and it was all hands on deck. He needed to make sure the city maintained order while he licked his wounds. He couldn’t let Hydra and all

the other pesky criminals think they can go on doing what they please just because he'd been called out. Nu-uh. He needed to maintain authority, or else he might not get it back when this whole mess was over. They were in dangerous territory; compromised and barely standing on both their legs (and that wasn't just a metaphor for his bum knee either). Hydra was targeting them and that's not child's play. Not like it was with Oscorp and Ten Rings.

And the more he thought about it, the more pissed off he was at these idiots all standing around and cheering like it was the end of a war instead of the start of one!

Tony's sure to hide his anger though. Goodness knows he didn't need to lash out with both the kid's present. Not when their relationships were already rocky because of his previous lashing out... he'll just have to save that for later.

The kid caught eye of him and his body pivots to face his direction. His face lights up at the sight of him, looking like an honest to goodness kid for once in his life... that kinda made Tony crack a smile. "Tony! Did you see that? 9 outta 10!"

Tony reaches the edge of the counter and smiles up at him. "Sure did. You got a nice aim, kiddo." He sits Peter on the expensive granite beside Harley when the kid started squirming and Tony glanced out at the crowd. "Get outta here! Go do your goddamned jobs before I throw your asses outta this Tower for being useless piles of shit! We don't got time for lollygaggin'!"

Harley seems unperturbed and uses the toe of his shoe to poke Tony in the shoulder and get his attention.

"Does that mean you'll let me practice now--"

"No," Tony responded firmly, watching as the crowd of idiots scattered, "You're thirteen. Five more years to go."

"Thirteen?! Are you kidding? You can't possibly be serious! It's not even on paper yet! I knew you were going to do this. I can't believe you."

Tony rolls his eyes at the dramatics. "Yea, well, believe it kid." He lifts his hand up towards him to help him down. "Now get down from there before you break your neck."

Harley rolls his eyes back at him in exasperation and knocks the man's hand away. He watches on sadly as his crowd of fans slowly disperses. "You're such a worrier; thought you were s'posed to be the fun one. Even Rhodey said it was okay."

Tony's brows furrowed. *Rhodey said what now?*

The kid still wasn't making move to get off the counter, so he lifted his hand again. "I'm not gonna fall, okay." Harley scoffed, knocking the hand away again and began to crouch down so he could climb down. "I'm *fourteen*, I can climb on the counter without-- Whoa!"

Peter's hand fisted in his jeans knocked him off balance and before he knew it, he was nosediving towards the tile before he could get the proper footing to safely hop down. Thankfully, he was caught by a familiar strong arm wrapping around his waist and hauling him back on his feet.

"Not gonna fall, my ass," Tony grumbled, keeping hold of him until the kid pulled away.

"That-that was a slip-up. It was Peter's fault!"

"No it wasn't!" Peter shouted, his puckered pout returning and his arms crossing over his chest

defiantly once more. That seemed to be the kid's go-to thing today.

"Alright, stop it," Tony sighs, "it's nobody's fault, just calm down." He plucked Peter up from the counter and placed him back on the floor. "Now where the hell is Rhodes? He's supposed to be watching you."

Harley grabbed Peter's hand when he saw he was about to take off and looked up at Tony. "Happy came out like ten minutes ago sayin' one of the guys has been lyin', so Rhodey told me to stay here and show off my epic new potato gun that I was showin' him earlier this morning. He said the guys needed something to lift their spirits 'cause they're so high-strung and stressed out about Hydra. And then he went off with the guy and Romanoff to take care of him or something, 'cause he didn't want to bother you with it right then. Sooo, we just started shooting dishes and stuff once we ran out of paper plates. Everyone digs it... I think they like me now." Harley looks up at him with a triumphant smile just in time to catch Tony's grim frown. "All the guys said it was fine, though!" He quickly defends. "They said they do stuff like this all the time!"

"It's fine kid," Tony placates, "there's just a lot that needs to be taken care of which means I'm not a big fan of idle activity at the moment. But you do know they liked you fine before you pulled out your fancy weaponry there."

Harley doesn't respond and scuffs the toe of his shoe against the ground.

So, Tony nods his head in the direction of the elevator and gestures for the two boys to follow, but Harley doesn't budge, so neither does Peter. "Rhodey told me to stay put till he gets back."

"Well I'm the Boss, so my orders trump his."

Harley groaned. "And here I thought being your fake kid would make my life easier."

"You thought wrong," Tony responded, moving to brace his hand against the back of the kid's neck and guide him towards the elevator. "Mom wants us all up for dinner and a movie tonight, so let's go before she gets any more impatient."

He'll talk to Rhodey about this *later*.

After dinner Tony had the honor of suffering through Peter's newly developed aversion towards everything bath time. No amount of ducks or songs could lighten the boy's mood as he sat in the bubble-less water and stewed, with his arms crossed, as Tony poured cup after cup of water over his head.

Getting him dried and dressed was another venture in itself entirely. He could only take so much shouting before he lost his goddamn mind. So, he gave up halfway through and let the kid flee to the living room in search of his mother, decked out in nothing but his scooby-doo underwear and the bright pink socks he was for some reason infatuated with. Pepper hadn't been so pleased with him, but he was sore and tired, and he wanted nothing more than to sit down, relax, watch a movie, and go to sleep so maybe... just maybe the ringing in his head might stop.

He sat back on the couch with his eyes closed, listening as Pepper read the boy a book from his growing Dr. Seuss pile lying on the coffee table. Peter was snuggled comfortably into her side, tiny hand stroking her belly bump. Then Harley joined them a few minutes later after he'd finished doing the dishes and listened to the remainder of the story. When they finished Pepper used the book to reach over and slap Tony in the leg so he would start their movie. He complied and cued up their movie then collapsed back into the cushions with a tired sigh... he knows he should

probably be doing work, but he's just so exhausted. He didn't get an awfully long sleep last night. Not when Peter woke up screaming his bloody head off. The sleep was glorious while it had lasted though.

So, when he glanced over halfway through the movie to find Pepper trapped between the two cuddle-monsters she had created, he found himself growing a little jealous. He knew it was ridiculous because it was. If his father knew what he was thinking or feeling he'd surely be his way halfway through an hour beating already. Howard would have never put up with this cuddly mush.

He's a softy now and he kind of resents himself for it... he's disappointed that he's allowed himself to become so vulnerable.

"Stark men are not soft, Anthony."

He could feel the cold malice of his father staring down at him with a scowl and a shiver rippled across his skin even after all these years... but then he could feel the contrasting warmth of Peter's tiny body laying across his front, or Pepper's back pressed to his chest and the warmth of her belly beneath his hand. Even Harley's fleeting touches and the rare hugs they'd share when the emotions in the room became just a bit too heavy to handle on their own. It was warm, and nice, and safe, and he's reminded why he allowed himself to go so soft in the first place.

He supposed he could wait if he had too, because he'd work his way back there eventually.

So, Tony leaned back into the couch and kicked his feet up on the coffee table as he closed his eyes. Whatever Disney song was being sung on the TV did just the trick for easing the tension out of his muscles and calming the thoughts running all through his head and if he accidentally slipped off to sleep with a peace of mind, nobody had to know.

"Alright boys, Mama's gotta use the bathroom real quick," Pepper whispered softly, nudging gently at the two boys draped on either side of her.

Peter sits up blearily at the soft nudge, rubbing at his eyes and yawning like a baby kitten. He glanced over at the TV screen to notice he hadn't missed much while when he dozed off and he smiled. Harley sat up too. He yawned with a hand covering his mouth as Pepper slowly starts pushing herself up from the couch.

"Ma, you need help?" Harley slurred, stumbling to his feet to help her up despite her insistence she could do it herself. He grabbed her hand and pulled her up gently then made move to wrap his arm around her waist and help her to the bathroom as well.

"I'm fine, Honey, I can make it to the bathroom myself," she smiled, shooing Harley away.

Harley hesitated briefly. He felt conflicted. He didn't want her to get hurt, but at the same time he didn't want to risk making her upset with him; life was just beginning to work itself out and he was finally starting to feel happy again. So, he let her go by herself, sat back down on the couch beside Peter, and turned his attention back to the movie.

Peter, on the other hand, looked like a zombie. Like he was going to keel over at any second and pass out.

"Ha'ley," he groaned, turning to look at him with a pitiful pout on his lips as if the end of the world were upon them, "can we snuggle?"

Harley thinks about saying yes. He knows Peter was extremely dependent on physical contact,

especially today for some reason, and the idea of denying him such a basic comfort that he himself craved more often than not nowadays seemed like such a jerk move. He felt bad for Peter, especially after all that had gone down with Tony. Peter had been so attached to the man, which had made his 'betrayal' that much more traumatic for him. The poor kid's been consciously depriving himself of affection from the one person that could make it all better. Harley looked over to Tony only to find said person passed out and snoring up quite the storm. Then he got an idea.

"Why don't you go snuggle with your Dad. He looks real comfy to sleep on over there doesn't he? Lot more than me. He's big warm marshmallow like Baymax. Look't me, I'm all bone; no cushioning."

Peter looks at him like he's just lost his goddamned mind, and Harley isn't so sure that he hasn't. A couple months ago he wouldn't be inserting himself into family conflicts like this, but he knew things wouldn't truly be okay until the two who had started it all kissed and made up. He knows Tony's ready to forget the past, and he thinks Peter is too... it's just... the kid's probably confused and unsure what to feel.

Peter looks over at Tony, then back to Harley. "You mean *our* Dad, right? 'Cause-'cause we're b'others. An-and 'cause he didn' hurt you. An-an he didn' hurt our Mama." He said it almost as if it were an inquiry. As if he were trying to confirm once more what both Harley and Pepper had told him before... like he had to make sure one last time before he allowed himself to fully forgive the man.

He hated that Peter kept bringing the Dad thing up. He was still kinda sour about thanks to Asher's not so fun teasing a while back. And, really, it's had only been a onetime thing. The guy hadn't brought it up since. And heck, he shouldn't really be bothered by it when it was coming from Peter either. The kid genuinely believed it; he couldn't grasp the intricacies of his insinuation. To him it was simple. Either Tony was their Dad, or he wasn't. Either he took care of them and loved them, or he didn't. So, in this case Tony was more their Dad than not.

So, considering all this... it'd probably be best not to confuse Peter because goodness knows if he tries and makes this any more complicated, Peter'd need more explanation and Harley was bound to dig himself into another hole trying to explain it.

"Yeah, that's what I meant."

Peter grinned at him, and without any more prodding he turned to crawl his way across the couch towards Tony. It only took a moment's hesitation when the boy reached his side. He sat back on his haunches and watched the rise and fall of the man's chest, but then he fell forwards and braced both hands on his chest as he eagerly worked at lifting the man's arm.

Tony stirred briefly at the sudden contact and frustrated grunting coming from his side as someone pulled on his arm. He smacked his lips and grunted as he stretched out his legs and waist before he finally realized what must be going on. "Mmm, hey kid," he mumbled. He didn't even bother opening his eyes. Instead, he just lifted his arm. Peter quickly wedged himself beneath the crook of his arm and pressed in close, propping his chin up on the man's chest and looking up at his face with a small smile.

"Hi," Peter chirped. For the first time that day, the boy actually sounded cheerful. Tony cracked an eye open and turned his head to look at him, a goofy smile pulling across his face as he lowered his arm to wrap around Peter in a warm hug. And that was followed by a big yawn as the kid turned his head, so his cheek rested comfortably on his collar, nose upturned to press against his jugular. A tiny arm snaked around his waist and the tiny fingers that accompanied it grabbed for the hem of his shirt, brushing the cold skin of the boy's fingers against the warm gauze wrappings around

Tony's waist. Tony settled a hand on his back, humming in contentment at the warmth of the boy's smooth skin.

Ironically, the comfortable weight of Peter lying on his chest threw away the weight that'd been pressing down on his shoulders ever since the event three days ago.

"So, I'm finally worthy of your affection again, kid?"

Peter lifted his head to look at him, blinking blearily and lifting his fist to kneed into one of his eyes as he yawned once more. His eyes closed then he nodded slowly with a soft hum and scooted closer so he could lay his cheek on the man's shoulder. "Just till Mama gets back," he answered softly.

The hand fisted around the hem of Tony's shirt lifted to grab onto his collar as the kid practically scooted his way into his space to lay on top of him.

Tony's chest rippled with the vibrations of his chuckle. He almost forgot just how cuddly this kid was. "So, I'm just your substitute pillow then?"

"Yeah."

Tony chuckles again and rubs his hand up and down Peter's back as the boy curls closer to him. Then he twists his head to press his nose into the boy's hair and he presses a chaste kiss to the mop of his still damp curls. He feels his throat tightening and his entire chest warming when he feels the kid's loving nuzzle against his neck. His throat grows dry and soon the words are spilling from his mouth before he can stop them. "Yeah, well I still love ya, kiddo."

Peter slowly lifts his head off his shoulder and blinks lazily at him with his wide doe eyes and a wobbly lip. And for a second Tony thinks he messed up again and he could feel his body already beginning to seize with panic. Which was ridiculous by the way! He should not be panicking over a toddler's reaction to him saying 'I love you'. He was a Stark! A man! A freaking mob boss billionaire for crying out loud. He swears, if his forefathers were able to, they'd disown him on the spot for being so sensitive and weak.

"Really? Even-even after I be bad? You-you were mad b'fore." Peter whispered quietly into the small space between them, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth and effectively knocking Tony out of his breathless panic. One of Peter's tiny hands lifted to place on the side of Tony's face and Tony wasn't sure how to respond... Of course he still loved the kid even despite the several tantrums throughout the day. If it had been any other child, Tony knows he would have handed him off and not bothered to interact with him again, but this was *Peter*. He loved Peter... despite his best effort not to become attached. And it made him realize just how vulnerable he was allowing himself to become. Men like him weren't supposed to get attached; it was against the rules. It opens himself to an entire new world of pain and worry. And if his father had been there with them, he wouldn't hesitate in coaxing Tony into taking it all back, because it was dangerous. It was dangerous to love a tiny, helpless being so extensively, but Tony did. He loved Peter more than he's ever thought himself capable of loving. Peter was his kid now... and he needed to tell his kid that he is loved because it sure messed *him* the hell up not hearing it as a child. And he'd never wish that on Peter. He'd never make the same mistakes Howard did. He'll be the good Dad Pepper tells him he can be.

And so, he swallows his pride, and ignores every notion he'd been taught growing up, and tells his kid the truth.

"Bug, there will be times when you get so mischievous and naughty that I can't help but get mad

at you,” Tony begins softly, swallowing around the growing rock in his throat as he brushes his hand through the curly bangs bouncing on his kids’ forehead. “I might even scold you from time to time, but that *never* means I don’t love you.” He leans forward to kiss the center of Peter’s forehead softly and the boy leans into it, wrapping his arms around his father’s neck to keep close to him, and Tony doesn’t fight him. He kisses him several more times and moves his head, cheeks pressed together, so he could continue speaking. The more he spoke, the easier it was. Maybe he was delirious from sleep deprivation, but for some reason he was feeling ridiculously sappy as he slowly rocked the boy in his arms. “I love you more than life, kiddo, and I’d give you the world if I owned it.” He finished it off with a chaste kiss right above the boy’s ear and pulled him closer.

Peter’s arms tighten around his neck, and his nose nuzzles into his collarbone, but he doesn’t respond... and Tony feels okay with that.

Harley watched them both in a non-stalkerish kinda way. It was nice and sweet, and Harley still had to get used to *Tony Stark* being a goddamned softy, but that was more than okay. He’s just glad Peter is finally learning to trust Tony again and he’s glad that maybe Tony won’t be as sad anymore. Because he doesn’t know what Peter or Pepper would have done if Tony would have gone through with his ‘attempt’. He’s only glad that he was able to help in some way to fix what both Peter and Tony obviously needed.

Pepper returns a few moments later, but by then, both Tony and Peter were conked out again. Peter quite literally draped on top of him.

She glanced over at the pair and smiled, and then she paused right before she reached the edge of the couch. Then she turned to look at Harley with a happy sparkle in her eyes and a careful turn of her head.

“C’mon Honey,” she motioned for him to come closer. “You want the inside or the outside?”

Harley’s eyes widened... he didn’t really know what she meant by that. She didn’t really provide him with much context other than a peaceful smile and a hand wave. “Uhhh, outside?”

That must have been an okay answer because she grinned and sat back down on the couch, but this time pressed up against Tony’s side, nearly smushing the man into the armrest he sat beside, but he remained asleep. Then she grabbed the blanket laying across the back of the couch and began unfolding it as she waved Harley over and patted the empty seat on her other side.

Harley hesitated, because of course he did. He glanced around Pepper’s body, towards Tony. The man was barely awake. He had shifted to accommodate Pepper, but that was the extent of it. Peter kept snoozing away on Tony’s chest, and Tony’s arms remained around him... Harley just didn’t want to intrude. Not when things were just starting to go back to the way they were supposed to be.

But then he looked back at Pepper, feet kicked up, and relaxed as she raised her arm out for him in invitation. He was supposed to be a part of the family. At least in the most literal of senses. So, he used that thought to fight off the stupid insecurities that have been making his life a living hell for most of his existence as Harley Keener, and he allowed himself to tuck in close to Pepper like he was a little kid searching for comfort from his mother... and he sort of was in a way. Pepper was his mom now. He was a kid... this was okay. Maybe Harley Stark could be different. Maybe he could be better, more confident in himself, stronger, smarter, braver, and more worthy of the family he was being given.

Pepper pressed a lingering kiss to his hair and hugged him tight as she leaned back into Tony’s side and fixed the blanket around her and Harley. Harley followed her, wrapping an arm around her waist and melting in the loving warmth he felt every time he was near her, trapping the comforting

feel beneath the confines of their blanket. He could feel the warmth of Tony's side brushing against the back of his hand as well, and for once in his life Harley felt like he might actually like sticking around for once.

After the movie finishes and the credits start to roll, Pepper looks on either side to find all three of her boys dead asleep and she smiled to herself as she urged the three of them awake. Tony groaned and growled like a pained animal, muscles taut from the uncomfortable sleeping position he'd succumbed himself too and the constant weight of Peter resting on his injured ribs. Peter hadn't liked the excessive movements all that much and he grunted in annoyance, cheek pressed firmly against the center of Tony's chest as he slept.

Tony has Harley help Pepper to their room and the boy happily obliges with a nod and a wide yawn as he untangles himself from the heavy blanket he and Pepper had been snuggled under for the duration of the film. Then Tony carries Peter to his room and tucks in the dozing child while still half asleep. He makes quick work of the usually drawn out ritual and makes his leave as soon as the boy is nestled comfortably beneath the blankets. His mind was still muddled and gooey from exhaustion and a very heavy dose of serotonin, but all he knew in that moment is that he wanted to go back to sleep. For once in his life he actually *wanted* to go to sleep. He wanted to curl around Pepper, stroke her stomach, and drift off with his face pressed into her soft, honey-scented hair, and delve into a dreamless sleep to hold onto this blithe feeling of happiness that was sure not to last very long if he remained awake long enough to become fully aware of all that needed to be done.

He ends up passing Harley in the hall on his way back to his room, offering the kid nothing more than a nod and tired "goodnight" as they brush shoulders and move onto their own beds. It doesn't really cross his mind to help the boy to bed like he had done the other night; he doubts the teen would be very excited by that. He had made it extensively clear lately that he was not a 'baby' and he should not be treated as such. So, again, Tony didn't think much of it and wrote off the kid's conflicted frown as tired confusion.

When Tony woke up the next time it was Pepper again, this time kicking him in the shin.

"Tony," she hissed, blindly slapping his shoulder with the back of her hand.

He blinked awake, suddenly on full alert. She sounded upset. Was something wrong? Something must be wrong for her to be up in the middle of the night! Pepper never woke up for anything. Was something wrong with the baby? Was she going into labor?! She still had two months left!

"Peter's crying," she finished, before he could spiral too far. She grasped the bedsheets between her fists and stared at the bedroom door.

Tony sat up, tension releasing in his shoulders. He glances towards the door, then back at Pepper. He couldn't *hear* Peter. He squinted at her and cocked his head to the side, wondering why she was even bothering with waking him up when she could take care of it herself. She's never bothered with him before... then he realized that she wasn't supposed to move around much, and she wanted him to go and take care of whatever it was that had Peter in such a panic she could hear his distressed cries from the room over... but he still couldn't hear anything.

Then he hears it. It's a piercing cry that breaks through the silence of the room, and a panicked tremor thrums through his chest.

"Daddy!"

Tony jumps from the bed and grabs his zip up hoodie without even bothering to grab the cane he

had propped up beside the bed; it would do nothing but slow him down and get in his way. He doesn't really leave himself time to wonder why Harley wasn't already up and bringing Peter to their room like he did all the times before -- surely the kid had woken up from Peter's loud cries. So, he pushes his arms into the sleeves of his hoodie and rushes down the hall, steps growing heavier and more urgent the closer he got to the boys' door. Peter did *not* sound happy. And it wasn't his usual screaming that he'd been doing all day either; the boy sounded terrified.

And if his sobbed shouts of "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" were anything to go by, Tony could only assume the child felt imminent danger.

He threw open the door and rushed into the room, slightly illuminated by the nightlight beside the boy's toddler bed.

"Peter," he breathed softly. He crouches down beside the bed and grabs the child before his screams could grow any louder. "Hey Petey, look it's me."

Peter's eyes remained screwed shut and his mouth remained open as another terrified wail escapes him followed by gasped sobs as he replenished his lungs with air. It's followed by a soft keening, tamped down with a tight chest and repressed sobs.

Tony squeezes him against his chest in a tight embrace, cradling the kid's head with the back of his hand and pulling him close. That's when Peter finally begins to die down. Tony sits down slowly on the edge of the bed and keeps Peter firmly cradled against his breastbone.

"Daddy," Peter whispered, voice quaking to match the harsh trembling engulfing his body. His tiny arms snake around Torso torso threading into the space between the warm fabric of the man's hoodie, and the soft cotton of the man's sleep shirt. He lets the cloth and the man's arms encompass him as he releases another harsh sob, pulling closer so he could muffle it against the man's broad chest. "Daddy," he cried again, sobs now mingled with relief.

Tony kisses the top of his head and holds him close. He hates his child being in distress, but he's giddy with the understanding, once again, that his child still loves him. His child called on him for protection and comfort. His child wanted *him*. "Daddy's right here Bubba," he hums softly, rubbing his hand down the boy's shivering back. "Now tell me what made you so upset, huh?"

Peter's nose presses into his sternum as the boy scrambles to find a firmer grip on him. His little body wracked with sobs and for a moment Tony was genuinely worried that he had accidentally sent the child into another panic. "Bubba, just tell Daddy what's wrong. Daddy can fix anything, remember."

Peter's staticky nod is followed by a short series of hiccups. Tony kisses his hair again and lays his cheek there. "Tell me what's wrong, Bug-a-Boo."

"I-I-I got hurted by-by my mean Daddy!" Peter eventually forced out, which was quickly followed by another sob-fest. "An-an-an' I woked up in bed, but-but JA'VIS wouldn' answer me. An-an-an Ha'ley wasn' here eit'er, so-so-so I thought you mighta gived me back to my mean Daddy while I was 'sleep!" He turns in the embrace to point towards the empty bed pushed up against the wall across the room.

Tony stands abruptly. He holds Peter close, but he steps closer to the bed Harley's been sleeping in the few nights he's stayed in the penthouse. He does his best to soothe Peter with back rubs as he inspects the area. He stares at the rumpled mess of sheets on the empty bed. He couldn't help but worry. What if the kid had run off again? It wasn't like JARVIS could have informed him this time either... Hell, he really should have just sucked it up and updated JARVIS before he went to bed.

Apparently, his reassuring touches weren't enough to soothe the child and Peter only sobs harder.

"P'ease don' give me back Daddy! I sorry. I so, so sorry!"

Tony is snapped back to reality, attention diverted from the bed and back to the boy in his arms.

"Sorry for what Bubba?"

"I didn' say I love you when I do! I so sorry! I love you too Daddy; I don' hate you no more. P'ease don' give me back to my bad Daddy."

Tony's heart knots together as Peter squeezes him tighter-- as if he were afraid the man would let him go and hand him back to his bastard of a father.

"Never, Bubba," Tony whispers. "You never have to worry about seeing that man again. You're staying right here with me. Don't you remember what I said... I don't care how angry you get at me, or how many mean things you say... me and Mama will still always love you; forever. Do you understand?"

Peter's nod is shaky, but it's a nod either way.

"Good. Now do you wanna come sleep with me and Mama tonight."

Peter's nod this time was more emphatic and Tony chuckles. If Peter hadn't been so hysterical, he could have believed this was the boy's plan all along.

"Cuddles are good," Peter nodded sagely with a quiet snuffle.

"Alright, Buddy. Now, don't let this habit become any more of a habit." Tony chuckles and starts for the door, knowing good and well that he and Pepper were major enablers to this kid's dependency on them. Heck, the kid's had to be independent his whole life, Pepper and him were just helping the kid make up for lost time. He grabs one of Peter's small blankets from the bed on his way out and tucks it around the kid as he makes his way to the door. "Now, I'll leave you with Mama while I go off to find where Harley wandered off to."

Peter scrambles against his chest in a panic, "No Daddy, no!" He instantly devolves into pitiful cries once more. "Don' leave me, p'ease."

Tony's surprise at the sudden outburst has him squeezing the boy tighter before he drops him, whispering quietly in his ear as he holds the kid's head in place against his collar. "Okay, okay. Calm down. You can come with me."

Peter instantly quiets down. He rests his head on Tony's shoulder and slackens in the man's arms. Tony rubs his back again and glances down the hall where Pepper was surely still awake and worried in their room. He still needed to find Harley though. The kid was probably more likely than not camped out on the couch, rather than wandering the streets alone... but he just needed to make sure just in case.

"JARVIS..." he pauses when he remembers the AI had been shut down. "FRIDAY. Where's Harley?"

"I apologize Boss, but I do not have access to the cameras on the penthouse level. Only Master JARVIS has such jurisdiction when circumstances are not dire." Tony curses under his breath. That was why the AI hadn't woken him up when Peter was in such distress. "Okay, okay. Then tell Pepper I have Peter, and that everything is fine and she should go back to sleep."

FRIDAY grants him no answer so he can only assume she is relaying the message to his wife. So, he turns the opposite direction and heads down the hall, towards the large Living Room.

“Lady Stark is insisting you bring Peter back to bed with you, Boss.” FRIDAY pipes up when he's just advancing past the threshold into the room.

“Tell her I will. I just have to take care of a little something first,” he whispers under his breath that time. He'd spotted the lump on the couch, hidden beneath the blanket Pepper and the kid had been snuggled under that evening. He sighs in relief and slowly moves towards the sofa.

Peter doesn't make any noises beyond the periodic runny-nosed sniffs and soft whines, and Tony's proud when he doesn't grimace at all once the kid rubs his snotty nose all over his exposed collarbone.

As he approaches, Tony notices the slight tremors emitting from the lump beneath the blanket. His worried frown deepens. The kid couldn't possibly be cold... not with the heat on and the way he had smothered himself beneath that blanket...

He crouches beside the sofa and immediately regrets it. His bad knee screams in protest, but it'd be too much strain to stand up again right away, so he adjusts and uses his free hand to brace himself against the cushions of the sofa as he stumbles slightly and drops his good knee to the ground with a pained grimace. Once he's got his balance he reaches out and gently lays his hand on the shivering lump, unsure which end was up. The form immediately recoils at his touch, so he retracts his hand and his brows furrow together with worry.

“Hey, kiddo. Wake up for me, yeah?” He's not granted with an answer. So, he slowly reaches out to peel back one end of the blanket with careful hands. He ends up uncovering Harley's enormous mass of untamed curls and continues pulling the blanket until the boy's entire head could be seen. It isn't until Tony sees the look on the kid's face that his prediction was proved true.

Nightmares.

Apparently poor Pete wasn't the only one plagued with bad dreams tonight.

Harley's chin was tucked close to his chest, eyelids shut tight and lips pursed and pale as his chin quivered violently alongside his clicking teeth.

Tony transfers Peter to his other arm. The kid whines and huffs but settles against his other shoulder despite. Then Tony reaches out to comb his freed hand through Harley's wild hair. “Hey, munchkin,” he whispered softly, “it's okay. Wake up.”

Peter's head turns to rest his cheek on Tony's collar so he could get a look at Harley. His face puckers in worry and his hands clench and unclench around the form fitting fabric of Tony's tank. “Is-is Ha'ley okay?”

“Yeah, he's just having a bad dream like you did, Bug. He's okay.”

Peter's nose returns to his sternum and Tony combs through Harley's hair once more.

“C'mon sprout,” His hand lingers when he reaches the nap of the boy's neck. Four of his fingers thread through the thick mass of hairs at the back of his head, gently scraping along his scalp with blunt nails, while his thumb moves to brush along the boy's prominent cheekbone. “You're okay. It's Tony.”

For a moment Tony thinks he may need to go and get Pepper because he's not sure how to handle

this one. Peter's easy: baby voice, hugs, cuddles, kisses, back rubs, and butt pats. That's it. Harley's different. Tony doesn't know how to console a teenager who's as emotionally constipated as himself, but Pepper would know exactly what to do. He barely makes move to stand and go fetch her when Harley shifts then recoils away as if suddenly startled. His eyes fly open and a heavy gasp is drawn into his mouth to kick off the ragged breaths that follow.

"T-Tony?"

"Yeah, Munch," Tony smiled. He reaches out to cradle the back of the kid's head fully so he could make the kid look at him. "You okay?"

Harley stared at him; eyes clouded over with a daze. His mouth fell open slightly, but no words escaped him.

Tony patted his cheek softly. "Hey, look at me."

Harley does and he blinks again.

"You okay?" Tony reiterates with a concerned quirk of his brow.

There's another sharp intake of air before Harley releases a pained "yes sir".

"Breathe kid," He instructs gently, moving his hand to cup the side of the boy's head instead. Wedging the kid's ear in the space between his thumb and forefinger as he stroked the damp skin right beneath the boy's eye.

He wanted to know what the dream was about; yet at the same time he didn't. He wanted to know what could have elicited such a dazed reaction from the kid. He'd never seen Harley look so clueless to the reality around him. The kid was always so observant and quick. But Tony had a feeling of what it might be... and even the vague assumption had his heart beating fast and his throat tightening to accompany an angry growl. Rhodey mentioned Richard... if he found out Richard did anything more to scar his other kid too, that man would have hell to pay. He wouldn't deserve death; not yet at least.

Maybe he *should* just be left in the dark. He didn't think he'd be able to control himself if Harley did ever tell him what really happened.

Harley turned away from him and closed his eyes as he drew in several deep, calm breaths then released them just as calmly. "I'm fine," he whispered softly. "I swear I'm fine; just had a crazy dream is all. Jus' need to cool down a sec."

Tony frowns and retracts his hand. "Is that why you're out here on the couch? Did you have another dream earlier?"

"No," Harley growled, lifting one of his hands to cover his eyes. "I'm out here 'cause JARVIS ain't working."

"How is that relevant to you not sleeping in your own bed?"

"It's not *my* bed Tony. It's not even my room. Nothing is *mine* yet."

Tony sighed. It was true in a way. Him and Pepper had been planning on clearing out the spare room days ago... but then all this shit happened, and things got somewhat postponed. Pepper had said she'd done plenty of shopping during her down time, including an entire new wardrobe for both kids, furniture sets, toys, books, and just about anything and everything she could think of.

She'd also ordered a few more last-minute things for the nursery. So, all this '*nothing's mine*' crap was about to change real soon. But, bed or not... he still didn't understand why the kid felt the need to sleep out on the sofa.

"We'll get back to that later. Now explain to me why you're sleeping out here. You sent Pete into a panic when he realized you weren't in the room. Me too. You did this before too... what's with you and the couch kid? Do you not sleep good in the bed? 'Cause if that's the case, we can get you a better mattress. You just gotta speak up."

"It's not that..."

"What is it then?"

Harley still refused to look at him and Tony refrained from grabbing the boy's chin and forcing his gaze onto him... that was what he did before he was a dad...

"Someone coulda snuck up here and nobody coulda told us. The rats could still be hanging around here somewhere."

Tony fought back his amused smile. "Oh, and you think you coulda faced off against one of my guys with your shrimpy self?"

His amusement quickly falls away when he sees the kid's downfallen expression. His breath was picking up again and... well... it might've been the lighting, but the kid's eyes looked a bit glassy. "I've been watching YouTube," he argues petulantly as if that were reason enough for his superior fighting abilities.

"It's not your job to fight off the bad guys, kid. That's my job." Tony sighs, with just a little exasperation in his tone.

"You-you said I gotta protect Peter an' Pepper now. That's *my* job." He turns his head to look at Tony, expression stern and undeterred. "She's-she's gonna be my new Mom... an'-an' Pete's my brother... It's my job to keep 'em safe. I won't let 'em get hurt."

Tony purses his lips and remains silent. He adjusts Peter in his arms and makes move to stand up. "Alright... I guess this calls for another one of those dreadful heart-to-hearts, huh?" He doesn't stumble at all when he's back on his feet, which must be a good sign.

Harley scrambles to sit up and scoot against the far corner as Tony takes a seat on the couch beside him, manhandling Peter so the kid's cradled in his arms like a newborn baby, tucked close to his chest and legs dangling onto his lap. Peter isn't at all opposed to the new position. He grabs for the edges of the hoodie and does his best to wrap them around his smaller body, pushing his body and Tony's even closer for warmth.

"Cold," Peter whimpers pitifully, staring up at Tony with a small pout playing on his lips.

"Cold huh?" Tony smirked. He arranges the kid to tuck him behind the lapels of his jacket, then zips it up halfway so Peter's tucked close to him like a baby kangaroo nestled in his mother's pouch. Tony can't say that he hates it either. It was nice being able to be close to his kid again.

Peter grinned up at him and his eyes slipped closed as he moved around to find the most comfortable position.

"You brats are too spoiled for your own good." Tony wraps an arm beneath the bulge of his jacket, giving himself a moment to wonder if this was what Pepper felt like carrying their baby... then he

gently rested his other arm along the back of the couch as a discrete invitation for Harley to join if he so desired.

“And that’s our fault?” Harley mocked cheekily.

“I suppose I should take some credit,” Tony smirked.

He kept watching Harley. The kid had tucked himself into the corner, hands fisted around the blanket he’d been tucked under earlier. His knuckles were white, and his shoulders still shook with residual tremors despite the kid’s obvious effort to appear aloof to his terror.

“C’mere Buddy,” Tony discretely waved him closer with a few of his fingers. Harley obeys... kind of.

He scoots close enough that there’s a good two or three inches between them. His head was lowered to look at his lap again, but Tony decided not to push it.

“Does this happen to have anything to do with your mother and sister?”

Harley doesn’t answer him, but the slight flare of his nostrils was answer enough. Tony sighs and he lifts his hand to rub his eyes... he didn’t know how he should even begin to do this. How was he supposed to fix this?

“I know you feel responsible for what happened... and I don’t know the whole story yet, but I got a feeling you would have never put them in any intentional danger.”

“I didn’--” Harley’s voice starts out strong with an outburst, but he immediately trails off and hunches in on himself even more. “It was my job to keep ‘em safe... an-an’ I didn’t.”

“It shouldn’t have been your job Harley. You were barely twelve weren’t you?” The kid nods and Tony turns to look at the blank screen of the TV. “How old were you when your Dad left?”

Harley shrugs indifferently. “I dunno. Six maybe.”

“Wow... you were the man of the house for a long time then.”

“Someone had to be,” Harley grumbled. “Someone had to take care of my Ma and my sister.”

“You’re just a kid, Harley. You shouldn’t be responsible for something like that.”

“But I was responsible,” Harley bit out angrily. “After my father left, my mom got real sick. She got real angry sometimes... then real sad. And then she’d be happy again. She-she couldn’t hold down a job for nothin’. We lived off the checks my father would send, an-and me and my sister had planted a tiny garden in the backyard behind the garage so we’d have food when we didn’ have no money for groceries.” Harley’s grip tightened on the blanket and he lifted it so the hem was settled beneath his nose as he scrunched his eyes shut. “Then-then the checks stopped coming an-an’ I had to find a way to get some money... An-an’ I was stupid enough to go back to the guys my father ran away from in the first place...”

“Oscorp,” Tony finished for him, face etched with sympathy and an urge to gather the kid in his arms and hold him just like he was Peter... but the kid wouldn’t go for that. And it’d be weird too... him and Harley weren’t as close as him and Peter.

“Yeah,” Harley nodded lamely. “Yeah, Oscorp. Biggest mistake ever. I was s’posed to protect them and I ended up gettin’ ‘em killed.”

“You were just a kid,” Tony repeated softly, bristling at the insinuation towards Richard’s role in the death of the kid’s family... but he does his best to hide it.

“That’s not an excuse for killing my mother Tony,” Harley snapped. “If anything, it makes me even more of a monster! I was a kid! A twelve-year-old kid. I should’ve cried and begged and been a little wuss about it, but I shot her! I looked at her and I *shot* her right between the eyes. Twelve years old and already a murderer. I’m not... I’m not gonna make the same mistake twice. I won’t let anything happen to Peter or Pepper. Ever. I swear it.” His shy gaze had morphed into grim determination with a downturned scowl.

Tony remained calm though and tilted his head downwards to settle him with a steady look. “That’s not your responsibility either, kid.”

“Of course it is. Pepper’s going to be my mother, I have to protect her--”

Tony cuts him off with a shake of his head. “First of all, Pepper is a perfectly capable woman and as endearing it is that you want to protect her; she’d be pissed the hell off if you ever put yourself in danger for the sake of her safety.”

“You do it all the time!” Harley argued.

“Yes, because it’s *my* job; not yours.”

Harley’s face falls. “But-but I don’t understand.”

Tony takes that moment to wrap his arm around the kid’s shoulder and pull him closer. Too hell with both their emotional constipation, the kid needed comfort and he’s gonna damn well give it to him.

The boy comes easy; too distraught and confused to put up any protest. So, Tony tucks him close so the boy’s shoulder is tucked beneath his armpit and his cheek is pressed to his shoulder. He keeps a steady hand on the side of the boy’s skull to keep him in place as he presses a firm kiss to his hairline.

“I know you don’t, Munch. I’m sure it’s not easy.” Harley slumps against him, stiff bones loosening as he melts into Tony’s hold. “But you need to understand that you’re a kid, okay? You’ll get it once you have your own family to take care of. And you’ve never had a good Dad before who steps up and takes care of you like he’s supposed to, I get that; I really do. You’re used to having a sick mother that’s dependent on you, and I’m sure you took such a quick liking to Pepper because she reminded you of the mother you lost... So, I know it’s gotta be hard accepting that someone else is here to take care of you now, not the other way around. It’s not up to you to carry everything on your shoulders anymore; that’s *my* job. It’s my job to protect you, to protect your mother, and your brother. It’s my responsibility. You shouldn’t burden yourself with a Dad’s job when you’re still a kid, make sense?”

Harley shifts uncomfortably. He looks down at Peter who had finally fallen asleep in the makeshift hoodie pouch and frowns. Then he whispers, “but-but you’re not my real Dad.”

“Just because you don’t see me as your Dad, doesn’t mean I don’t see you as my kid. I’d throw the entire world to hell if it meant keeping my family safe, and that includes you now, as sappy as that sounds. You understand?”

Harley nods slowly, cheek still pressed against his shoulder.

“Good.”

They sit there for a good few minutes as Tony lets that sink in. He's not sure when the right moment would be to haul him off to a proper bed. He knows all he wants to do is sleep, but he won't deprive the kid of the comfort he obviously needed. It was obvious the kid had grown up with and was used to a mother's loving affection and had simply been deprived of it for too long. As much as the kid tried to play himself as tough and indifferent, Tony could easily see right through him... the kid reminded him too much of himself.

"Y'know," Harley whispered after a while, "My father was wrong about you." Tony cranes his neck to look down at him. "You're not mean and scary. You're just a soft ol' Papa Bear."

A loud laugh escapes him and Tony's quick to muffle it before he wakes Peter by pressing his face into the kid's hair, giving him a sloppy kiss. "Guess that makes you and Pete my Cubs, hm?"

Harley pulls his head away slightly to look up at him. Tony's unfamiliar with the look the kid gives him, but if he had to guess it would be somewhere on the brink of hopeful and happy. Then the kid's eyes crinkle in amusement and a playful scoff escapes his lips. "That was so cheesy. You're so weird."

"Think that's in the job description, Cubby," Tony growls playfully, wrapping a strong arm around his waist and pulling him back when he started trying to escape. Harley laughs and Tony pulls him closer, clamping a hand over his mouth to quiet the loud laughter. "You just bring out the weird in me, kid."

"You're so lame. I'd think having a Don as a fake Dad would be cool and fun, but you're just as bad as all the other cringey Dads on the Disney channel."

Tony pokes him lightly in the ribs to elicit another round of laughter. "I take that as a compliment." He pokes the kid again, wriggling his fingers along the sensitive parts of his side. "Shh, no laughing," he whispered playfully as he proceeded to tickle the kid even more. "No laughing; you can't laugh. Stop laughing."

Harley's laughs quickly morph into muffled squeals as he pushed at the arm holding him down and attacking his sides mercilessly. "Stop it," he laughs breathlessly.

"Shhh," Tony shushes as if he wasn't currently tickling the hell out of him.

"Tony, stop," Harley laughed joyfully, twisting around to try and escape the hold.

"I'm not doing anything," he replies innocently as his fingers do another sweep along his ribcage.

"You're such a jerk," Harley laughs, finally grabbing hold of the offending hand and holding it tightly between both his own. He collapses against Tony's side breathlessly, the aftershock leaving him wheezing with quiet giggles, as he grasps Tony's hand tightly in both his own as if afraid if he let go the man would attack once more.

"Takes one to know one," Tony hums, stroking the back of the boy's knuckles with his free thumb.

Harley scoffs, but he doesn't move even after Tony's arm loosens from around him.

Then Tony has a grand idea; one that terrifies him. He looks down at Peter, who is somehow, by some miracle, still sleeping soundly in his warm cocoon. It gives him a little confidence to push aside the natural urge to run away from any sort of vulnerability; emotional or physical.

He'd said it to Peter moments earlier... and he's said it to Pepper a million times... but this time it feels different. Like there's a risk involved. Like this time, it may actually lead to problems

allowing himself to love this child beside him, but *heck*, he already does. It's too late.

He can remember his father's firm words to discourage him from attachment, all but banning his nanny from soothing him after one too many times of crying out for her.

"Anthony," his father says, eyes alight with indifference as his son cries at his feet, "attachment will bring you nothing more than fear, vulnerability, and grief. It will distract you from your true potential. The sooner you get that abstract fairytale of love out of your head the quicker you'll be able to shoot her in the head." His finger lifts to point to the panicked Latino woman tied to the chair across the room.

"But sir," Tony cried, "she didn' do nothin'." He turns his head to settle his gaze onto his nanny of nine years with a quivering lip. "She just... she jus' fetched my old bear. That's all."

He didn't feel the slap so much as he heard it. He was too used to the constant welts on his face for it to affect him anymore.

"After you were blubbering for it like an imbecile! You don't need a stuffed bear! You are a ten-year-old boy, and you are far too sensitive and dependent. It's all because she catered to you so much as a child, and now she's enabling your dependency and your innumerable weaknesses. Now do what I say and put a bullet in her head!" He held out his rustic revolver, so the handle was his for the taking.

The gagged woman sobbed loudly, and Tony shook his head adamantly. "Sir, I can't. Please. I'll do better, just don't make me hurt her."

His father scowled at him and spun the gun around in his hand. In all of two seconds his arm was outstretched, finger pulling on the trigger, and a loud bang sounded through the room as Tony's nanny went slump in her chair.

Tony doesn't necessarily remember screaming. He remembers his father's words afterwards though. He had crouched down and gathered him into his arms like he had been a loving father all along. *"Don't you see Anthony," he whispered with a soothing voice as his hand stroked the boy's hair gently, "allowing yourself to become attached to a person will only leave you vulnerable to pain in the end. If you had not cared for her as you did, you would not be feeling this way when I killed her. Does that make sense, my child?"*

Tony nods, rubbing the back of his hand beneath his nose, then the few tears trailing down his cheeks before resting his head on his father's shoulder as the man picked him up like he hadn't done in years. "Yes father," he responded, "it makes perfect sense."

And for years, Tony had genuinely believed it

He doesn't anymore. He hadn't for a long time.

And he thinks that's why he opened his mouth and whispered the words that he did. Just for the sake of saying F you, to Howard and his disgusting parenting methods.

"I love ya, kid. You know that, right?"

He can't be sure, but he thinks Harley stiffens slightly at the declaration.

"Yeah, well... " the boy's hold on his hands loosen significantly, "you're not so bad yourself, old man."

The tone was teasing in an attempt to make the weight behind the dismissal more lighthearted, and Tony rolled his eyes with a chuckle. The kid was like a perfect mix between him and Pepper, he didn't know how to handle it. He really could be their kid...

He shoves the boy off him with a scoff. "See. This is why I can't say nice things. Look what you did. You ruined a perfectly domestic moment, you brat." He begins pushing himself off the couch. He could feel his cheeks heating with slight embarrassment and his throat beginning to dry out; he had never been a huge fan of these emotional conversations and this was the exact reason why.

Harley laughs at him because of course he does.

"Stop laughing," Tony grumbled. He adjusts his hold on Peter as he stands to his full height then he reaches down to grab Harley by his upper arm to hoist him off the couch as well. "Come on. Let's get you back in a proper bed."

Harley stops, heels digging into the floor and he tugs against Tony's pull. The man turns around to look at him with a challenging raise of his brow.

"JARVIS is still down," Harley answers sternly, feet planted firmly beneath him.

"It's fine. FRIDAY's running the Tower till he's back up," Tony sighs. He was more than ready to go back to bed, especially after that emotionally draining conversation. He wasn't really in any mood to be arguing with the kid about this. He just wanted everything to be fixed and for everyone to go back to sleep.

"Well if JARVIS got hacked, I think FRIDAY's much more susceptible, don't you think?" The kid raised an eyebrow at him as well. "What if we get attacked again? What if something goes down? What if somebody comes up here to try and kill you guys while you're sleeping?"

Tony just looks at him for a few moments, studying his uneasy posture and the small glimpse of anxiety flickering through his eyes. He silently wishes that their little heart-to-heart would have calmed the kid down, but he supposed the kid still had right to worry... and he was also right.

As much as Tony hated to admit it, JARVIS being down put a very big hole in their security system. He hated that the kid had to be the one to point out his carelessness... and, like he'd told the kid, it was *his* job to keep his family safe. He shouldn't be making these careless mistakes when it came to protecting his family.

"I'll take care of it," Tony nodded seriously. He curses himself for allowing his body to compromise his better judgement. "I'll put Peter down with Pepper then run down to my workshop to grab my laptop to fix his code. But you sir," he points at him, "you are going back to bed because you need sleep."

Harley's quick to protest once again. "I'll go get the laptop!" He offers. "You're hurt and you're tired. Bruce said you need to rest, and I'm sure if you go down there you'll get distracted with something or another and then you won't get any sleep at all." The kid looked at him pointedly like he had just made the most logical argument ever. Tony wasn't so amused. "Plus, Pep and Pete would be pissed in the mornin' if you weren't there."

"Don't be ridiculous. Now c'mon. Go get in bed or I'll sick Pepper on you myself. Then we'll see who she gets pissed at."

Harley only crossed his arms defiantly and puffed out his chest, and... okay... now Tony was getting a little pissed off. Maybe this kid was too much like him. "I'm not going to be able to go to

sleep until this is fixed..."

The corner of Tony's lips upturn in a distasteful scowl. He had never done well with a person's blatant refusal to do what he said, and maybe this kid was getting a bit *too* ballsy for his own good.

He'll have to get on top of that later when he wasn't quite as exhausted.

"Fine," he bites out, "but you go down there and come straight back up, you here? Don't go snooping or socializing. It's way past your bedtime and you need to sleep."

Harley growls in irritation. "I don't gotta bedtime."

"You wanna talk back?" Tony challenges, raising both his eyebrows. "Watch me change my mind. You better skedaddle and do what I say before I change my mind, kid. My patience is wearing thin. Just because I like ya doesn't mean I'm not scared to teach you a proper lesson."

And Harley does just that.

Boy, what the turn this night has brought.

Harley was already sprinting his way back to the elevator when he's blocked by an arm shooting into his path. His gut rams into the arm and he releases a pained 'oof' before snapping his head up to look at the owner of the arm. It was Rhodey... and he really shouldn't be surprised.

The man looked down at him with a suspicious quirk of his brow. "Hey kid," he greets, "your Dad know you're down here at 2 in the morning?"

Harley sneers at him and wrinkles his nose. "He's not my Dad."

"Oh please," Rhodey scoffed. "If Tony's not your Dad, then I'm not your Uncle."

"You're *not*."

"Oh c'mon Sprout. I thought we really bonded yesterday."

"*No*," Harley droned with a patronizing lilt to his tone, "I called you a fun-sucker because you wouldn't let me spar with the assassin lady Happy said I could train with since we skipped out on my practice, and then you went all batshit crazy and shoved me off to shoot plates with my launcher."

Rhodey rolled his eyes. "Your Dad would have never let you train with Romanoff and you know it."

Harley growled, and if he were a cat he was sure his ears would have flattened against his skull. "He's *not* my Dad."

Rhodey shot him a look. "We've gone around this circle already, kid. We're not gonna get anywhere at this rate."

"I liked it better when you hated me," Harley muttered, hugging Tony's laptop close to his chest.

"Same, kid. But it's tough to hate your best friend's kid. It was a lot easier when you were just an annoying little pest brown-nosing all over the Boss' ass."

It was Harley's turn to roll his eyes. "Just leave me alone, man. Tony's waiting for me to bring him

this,” he nods down to the laptop he’s holding and Rhodey glances down to look at it. Then he looks back up and fixes Harley with an expression mingling between mournful and worried.

“Have you told him about your mother yet?”

“Yes, he knows I killed her,” he keeps it blunt and short and makes move to brush past him, but Rhodey grabs onto his bicep and holds tight.

“Lemme rephrase. Did you tell him about Richard forcing your hand?”

Harley pauses. His nostrils flare as he shoots Rhodey a menacing glare. “No.”

“Harley,” Rhodey chastises, “you need to tell him. He needs to make sure Parker feels pain for what he did to you. If he finds out after he kills him -- and he will -- he’s gonna be pissed, and he’s going to need somewhere to take out his anger, and I don’t want that to be on you... If you haven’t noticed, your father isn’t all that stable when it comes to his emotions.”

“He’s. Not. My. Dad. You dick.” Harley spat.

“Are we really gonna do this again?” Rhodey fixes him with the most exasperated look.

“You’re so obnoxious.”

A coy smirk grows across Rhodey’s face. “Funny. You’re Dad thinks so too.”

Harley groans

“Listen, kiddo, you just need to tell him... it’ll make you feel better.”

Harley sighs and glances down at his socked feet. “Yeah, okay... I-I almost told him tonight... but I chickened out. Um... maybe tomorrow, I might.”

“Good deal, kid,” Rhodey smiles, clapping him on the back and giving him a nudge forward, towards the elevator. “Now get back upstairs before your Dad rallies another search party.”

Chapter End Notes

This was ridiculously long...

And I'm too exhausted to write out a long end note. So let's just leave it with thanks for reading, hope you enjoyed, and I'd love to hear from ya.

Yeah, so I'm gonna go pass out now.

Ciao

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience guys! Hope y'all are coping good with this whole "thing" going on... I hope this might help you pass the time X)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“They’ve WHAT?!” Tony shouts. He knows he should have never answered his phone. All he ever got out of Steve's calls is a brand-new ball of tightly wound anxiety floating around in his stomach. He lowers Peter gently to the ground and rushes from the backroom he'd just finished recording in. Why did Rogers have to ruin such a perfect moment? He was sitting on top of the world just moments before – quite literally – preening and praising himself for a job well done after a hard day's work.

“Well maybe if you didn’t cause problems for me at every turn, we wouldn’t be having this issue. And by the way. What the hell was That?! What were you thinking?” Tony bristles. He feels Peter tug on his jeans and whine indignantly over the absolute atrocity it was to be put down, but Tony simply grabs the boy’s hand and leads him into the other room as he growls into the receiver of his phone.

“First of all, don’t talk to me like that, Rogers. Don’t try to put the blame on me here; you’re the one that’s screwed up. Second. I did what was necessary to buy me and my family time until I’m prepared to appear in court. Now, back to my initial question, WHAT the hell?”

Steve sighs. *“Ben Reilly’s what happened, Stark. The bastard’s chummy with the Feds and he’s supposed to be monitoring me while they work through this case. The commissioner thinks I’m working for you thanks to that live pronouncement Hydra broadcasted. So now Reilly thinks he can do whatever he sees fit without my permission and he’s sent those two bastards that shot at you into witness protection instead of pushing for their statements--”*

Peter jumps at his feet, arms extended, and lip jutted out in a major pout. Tony grumbled. It was nearly the kid’s bedtime... *where the hell was Pepper?* Oh yeah... she was in bed, where she’s been sentenced for the next two months. “Peter. *Please*, Dad’s working. It’s almost time for bed; go put on your pajamas and brush your teeth.”

“But I need hellllp,” Peter whined, stomping his foot emphatically.

“Hey, stop with the attitude,” Tony snapped, nudging the phone up a way so he could wedge it against his shoulder and ear as he bent down to pick the boy up and silence the whining. “Sorry, Rogers, it’s a goddamned crisis apparently. Just fill me in while I take care of this.”

Steve hesitates for a moment, but then he continues, and Tony totes Peter off to his room, passing Harley who was still snoozing on the couch where he’d passed out after dinner. Their long day and his sleepless night finally catching up to him.

Tony’d wake him up and send him off to bed here soon.

“So, Reilly sent the two guys into witness protection because he knows you want them. I’m not sure

if he's just trying to lure you out or if he genuinely wants them protected so they can testify against you in court. Plans might change drastically after your little stunt, though. So, who knows. All I know is I got this gut feeling that Reilly isn't as innocent as he plays off. He's dirty and he's up to something, and I think it has something to do with the two bastards he brought in."

"I need their location," Tony orders as he drops Peter onto his toddler bed and moves towards the dresser to fish out a pair of comfy pajamas.

"Bath!" Peter shouts joyfully at the same time Rogers says, *"I don't have clearance for information like that while I'm still under investigation."*

"Maybe tomorrow Peter," Tony sighed in exasperation, moving the phone away from his mouth as he spoke, then moving it right back to address Steve. "Well, you need to find someone that does. Those idiots took shots at my kid and I need to know why now rather than later."

He picks out some cute footie pajamas with cartoon astronauts littered across it. *"Stark, I told you I'm being investigated. They're watching my every move and quite literally breathing down my neck. If I get caught, I'm gonna be hauled off to prison for treason."*

"We'll bail you out if it comes to it. Get on it." Then with that, Tony ends the call with a tap of his finger and lays the device on top of the dresser. It immediately begins vibrating frantically with another incoming call from Steve, but he ignores it and moves towards Peter's bed with the fluffy onesie in hand. The kid had somehow tangled himself in his shirt in his effort to get it off, and Tony chuckled, leaning forward to help him out.

"Wow look at the predicament you've gotten yourself into, Bubba," Tony teased, grasping one of the boy's tiny wrists to cease the manic struggle and gently tug the fabric over his arms. "I can't even see your face. Where'd your wonderful face go?"

Peter giggles and Tony runs his fingers beneath the boy's exposed armpit. The boy thrashes away and laughs harder. Tony grins, forgetting about life's anxieties for just a moment as he enjoyed spending time with his baby boy. He grabs the hem of the shirt and tugs it all the way off, revealing the boy's reddened cheeks and his unruly up curls.

"There's my boy," Tony singsongs with a grin. Peter giggles some more, rolling away from him, but Tony grabs his ankles and yanks him back so he can hover over him. "Where you think your goin', huh?" He kisses Peter's nose and the boy giggles elatedly. So, he kisses both his cheeks, and the boy practically purrs, lifting his hands to cup either side of the man's face.

Then, before Peter knows what's happening, Tony's blowing a loud raspberry on his belly, and Peter shrieks in delight. Tony grins and blows another right above his belly button. Peter swats at him with his hands and kicks at his chest with his legs as he tries wriggling away from the man's ticklish beard and his obnoxious onslaught of tickles.

Tony pulls away only slightly, leaning over Peter, now grasping the boy's wrists. He grins down at him. Peter giggles wildly and Tony presses several lingering kisses to his forehead in soft succession. "How do you do that, huh? How do you always make Daddy's day so much better with just a little laugh? Tell me your secret."

Peter grins up at him through a yawn and wrestles his hands free to wrap his arms around the man's neck and arch his back off the bed to press closer to him. "Because I cute," he snarks just as he's nuzzling into the space beneath Tony's ear.

"That you are, you little munchkin," Tony growls playfully, lifting the boy in his arms and raising

him above his head to press another loud raspberry to his bare belly. Peter squeals loudly and Tony tosses him on the bed with a hardy laugh of his own.

Peter rushes towards him with his arms lifted and a giddy smile on his face. "Again! Again!"

"Alright, one more time. Then it's bedtime," Tony relented with a tired smile. "Then, we gotta brush your teeth and you gotta go to bed so Dad can get back to work."

He lifts Peter in the air, blows another raspberry, then tosses the kid onto his mattress. Peter giggles delightedly, and Tony smiles as he grabs the kid's ankles and drags him forward once more. He wrangles him out of the cargo shorts and into his comfy pajamas.

Then, he finds himself standing behind the boy, in front of the bathroom mirror as he uses the kiddie toothbrush to clean the kid's teeth. Peter uses the cup beside the sink to rinse out his mouth and Tony struggles to wipe the boy's face with a towel with Peter's eagerness to pull away and run back to his room.

Eventually he tucks Peter into bed, reads him the shortest story he could find, and presses another kiss to his forehead because the damn kid was just too precious. "Alright, I love you. Go to sleep. Mama's gonna be right around the corner if you need her, okay? Dad's gotta go back to work for a little bit. And I'll probably be downstairs working by the time you get up in the morning too, so try and be a little self-sufficient for Mama tomorrow, okay? She can't be moving around all that much anymore."

Peter grins up at him, squinty-eyed, bared teeth, and everything. "Kay Daddy. Love you too."

Tony combs back the curls on his forehead and moves away from the bed.

"Wait!" Tony pauses, and Peter continues shyly, "what does self sushifiscent mean?"

Tony smiles. "It means to try not to make Mama do everything for you. Try to make her job a little easier and don't throw any fits."

Peter nods, and Tony takes that as he understands, so he bids him goodnight once more, shuts off the light, and closes his door.

He sighs and takes a deep breath in preparation to go back downstairs to his office to continue with the mind-numbing paperwork he'd need to finish this time tomorrow. Gosh, going on vacation was such a hassle. Sometimes he wished he didn't have to worry about making sure his multi-billion-dollar company was in good hands, and about his not-so-secret crime organization being exposed and torn apart in his absence.

Gosh, Pepper usually handled this stuff... Why did he ever agree to this?

Harley spent the next morning with Happy while Tony worked. He had made breakfast for Pepper in bed and he helped Peter get ready for the day, but that was it. He wouldn't be able to sit around all day in the penthouse, watching Peter play with his toys on the Living Room rug... and Happy had promised him one more training session before he left for Italy with Tony and Pepper.

"Chin down, kid. Don't expose your throat like that," Happy grunts as he circles the kid in the arena. Harley obeys, chin ducking down and eyes lifting upwards to keep his eyes fixed on Happy. He's able to lunge forward and get a few weak jabs in before Happy's tossing him away with a strong arm.

“He’s looking good Hogan,” Rhodey chimes from the entrance of the training room, a proud smirk on his face and his back braced against the door jam with his arms crossed over his chest. Harley’s head snaps over in surprise as he turns to look at the man who had just entered the previously empty room. Happy takes the opportunity to swipe at his legs and he goes down in a pile of limbs, groaning as his back slaps right against the hard mat. He rolls onto his side, back to Rhodey, as he nurses his pride and hides his face until his reddening cheeks weren’t quite as flaming hot.

“Yeah, well, we still got some work to do,” Happy chuckles. “He seems to have the same problem as the Boss. Can’t pay attention for squat.” The man moves closer to the ropes wrapped around the edge of the square to greet Rhodey when he starts approaching. “Are we sure he ain’t really the Boss’ kid?”

Rhodey chuffs a quiet laugh and holds out a thick folder to Happy. “Can’t be too sure at this point really.” He glances at the kid still sprawled out on the mat, then looks back up at Happy in all his sweaty glory. “Nat wanted me to hand you the results of today’s tests... Have you picked out who’s riding along with Tones to Europe yet? They need to be debriefed here soon with the procedures. They’d be leaving tomorrow morning right before Tones takes off with Pep and the kids.”

Happy flicks through the folder and furrows his brows. “Na, but I’ll get on that. I’ve been busy. Have you got in contact with the Brit and his brother to sort out things with the real estate guys? If they’re leavin’ tomorrow, Boss’ stuff’s probably gotta be moved today.”

“No, that was your job, Hap,” Rhodey states with a reprimanding raise of his brows.

“Are you shittin’ me?!” Happy growls, “I’ve already got enough on my plate. I can’t sort the move *and* all this crap.”

“Well I’m busy too Hogan,” Rhodey snaps, narrowing his eyes.

Harley snickers from behind them and sits up slowly, hoping his cheeks had finally returned to their normal hue. Rhodey turns to look at him and rolls his eyes. “Yeah, laugh it up kid.” Then Rhodey turns back to Happy with a serious frown. “You should probably get on that Hogan. Tony’s all pissy today. He’s been doing paperwork since yesterday. You know how he gets when he has to do paperwork.”

Rhodey spins around and walks back towards the door. Happy shouts after him. “Hey-hey-hey, you’re not gonna help?”

Rhodey stops at the door and looks back at him. “I can’t.” Then his gaze flickered over to Harley momentarily, who was just getting back to his feet, and offered a sympathetic smile. “I have to get Parker prepped for this evening. Tony wants him gone before the end of the day and he wants to make it good, so I gotta make sure he’s in tip-top condition...”

He sees the amused smile on Harley’s face slip away, and Rhodey feels bad for the kid, but he can’t do anything to help. Tony’s been putting off this Richard nonsense long enough.

“Oh! And remember Tony wants a big yard for the kids and maybe a pool. Might wanna get on that here soon.”

Harley paces. He paces like he never paced before. Back and forth, back and forth in the hall right in front of Tony’s office. He debated knocking... he didn’t really want to talk to Tony, but at the same time he kinda had to. It was his last chance. He needed to talk to Tony before the man ruined any chances of him learning the real reason Richard decided it was necessary to leave him

traumatized for the rest of his life.

He felt a group of uncomfortable tingles surge through his body. He-he didn't want Tony to kill him... not yet... he still needed to know the real reason *why*. Why Richard made him do what he did. He needed to know... he needed to know if it was really his fault. If he was really the one to blame for the deaths of his mother and sister.

He needed to know how Richard was able to project the blame onto himself all these years. How he was able to manipulate him so fully effectively that Harley had actually begun to trust in the man instead of despising him for the things he had done. Was he really that stupid? Or was Richard really that good at what he did?

Because now... now he feels even more guilt looking back on all the times he had ample opportunity to shoot the man in the skull but never did. There were so many chances for him to avenge his family, but he never did, because he was a gullible coward that had been obediently following behind the man that made him kill his mother.

All he wanted now was one more chance... because this time he was thinking clearly... he wouldn't hesitate this time to take the shot. He'd pull the trigger without a second thought.

Tony couldn't kill him yet; not until he got his chance.

So, he paced.

He was nervous.

And he was scared.

What if Tony denied him this one last opportunity for closure with the excuse of '*you're too young*' that he seems to be so in love with? What if he had to live the rest of his life knowing he'd been willingly loyal to the man that took his entire life from him in the blink of an eye? What if he was never able to find out what he had done to generate such rage in a usually neutral and docile man?

Before he knows it, his back is hitting the wall next to Tony's office door and he's sliding down, knees folding to press against his chest, and he lowers his forehead to rest on them. He wraps his arms around his legs and hugs them closely as he takes slow breaths... he shouldn't be such a coward. He just needs to march in there and tell Tony what's been bothering him. It's not like he'd get mad... right? The worst that could happen would be being denied watching the man suffer... Tony could ask his questions for him even... all he had to do was walk in there and tell him something he'd never told anyone aside from Rhodey three nights prior.

"Master Harley, is everything alright?" JARVIS asks from above.

Harley jumps back to his feet. "Um-um yes! Everything's fine."

"Would you like me to inform Mr. Stark you have been waiting out here?"

Harley gulps. No! He feels his chest heave with something that couldn't possibly be air, because he couldn't breathe! Oh God... he couldn't breathe... He changed his mind! He didn't want to talk to Tony. No, he can't talk to Tony... he can't talk to him... he can't tell him. Not when these past couple days have been so good. He can't ruin it; he can't complicate it; he can't give Tony any more reason to feel angry or stressed... not after what happened last time. He can't risk it. "Um, no-no that's alright. I'll just go--"

“Too late!” FRIDAY chimes in innocently just when Harley takes a step away from the heavy set of doors. “I have informed Boss already and he is coming to get you.”

“W-what?!”

“FRIDAY,” JARVIS placates with what almost seems to be a sigh, “we’ve talked about this. That is not protocol. You cannot make decisions on your own discernment until Mr. Stark codes you to do so. I apologize Master Harley,”

“But Master JARVIS,” FRIDAY argues as if she were a petulant child, “Master Harley is in distress and he is in obvious need of comfort from his father.”

Harley’s remains frozen as he listens to the surreal conversation taking place between the two computers. If he wasn’t already stressed the hell out he would probably be totally enjoying this... but he wasn’t.

“You must pick your battles FRIDAY. Not every matter should be dealt with your discretion. You were made to obey orders.”

The door to Tony’s office swings open and Harley jumps again. His head instantly swivels to fix on the man standing in the entryway. He looked exhausted. A hand covered his eyes as he massaged the sides of his temples. “Cut the little lady some slack JARVIS. No need to get pissy just ‘cause she replaced you for a day.”

“I apologize, sir.”

Tony waves a hand in the air, and both AI’s seem to get the hint, because neither of them say a word after that. Which leaves just Harley and Tony; Tony and Harley... and Harley can’t help but gulp again when his heart begins beating just a bit too fast. Tony fixes him with a look he’s unsure about.

“What do you need, kid?”

He sounded snappy... like... in not such a good mood kinda snappy. Yeah... he should probably just forget about it. Screw having unresolved trust and attachment issues for the rest of his life! Who cares.

“Uh, I-I um... I just--”

Tony rolls his eyes at him and opens the door wider. “Get your ass in here. Stop being so indecisive.”

Harley doesn’t really have the courage to argue. He feels stiff and anxious and-and he just can’t seem to relax. So, he rushes forward, tucking his chin close to his chest and passes by Tony and into his office. The man lays a hand on his shoulder, but he flinches away just enough to make him pull away. He stops when he’s a few feet in front of the desk at the far end of the room, gaze still fixed on his shoes.

Tony goes to sit back down in his chair and casts an inquisitive glance towards him. “What’s wrong?”

Harley shifts, rolling his weight from one foot to the other, gritting his teeth and squeezing his eyes shut to keep the words from spilling out of his mouth. “Nothing’s wrong,” he fibs with a bit of a snappish tone of his own. He doesn’t know where the irritation came from, but it felt like his insides were vibrating and his head was pounding with a numb, deafening bang after bang and he

just needed to get *away*. Away, so he can go curl up in a dark corner and catch his breath. He needed to breathe...

He instantly regrets the tone when he sees the look on Tony's face. Yeah, the man was definitely not in one of his best moods. Maybe not the best time to test him...

"I'm gonna give you the benefit of the doubt here, kid, so I'm gonna let that one pass, but I just want you to know that I don't appreciate that tone."

"Figured you wouldn't," Harley muttered, wrinkling his nose. *Why was he annoyed now? What the hell? What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he be normal and communicate his feelings in a normal goddamned way for once?! Why does he have to be such a prick?! Be sensitive and apologetic! Be like Peter! Tony loves Peter...*

He can see the way Tony grit his teeth.

"I hope you didn't just come in here to piss me off because I am *not* in the mood to deal with you today. Now, tell me what's really bothering you or hightail it on outta here."

"*You're* the one that forced me in here!" Harley accused, pointing a shaky finger at the man and glowering his best glower. "I was just fine with walking off, but *no*. You just gotta stick your nose into everyone's business."

Ok, ok, back up. Time to cool down. Stop talking. Why was he talking?! Stop! Just apologize and leave! Don't make him mad!

It was scary how calm Tony remained. "*Everything* that happens in this Tower and this city is my business. And *I* wasn't the one pacing outside the door for the better part of half an hour. You obviously want to tell me something, so just tell me and we can both get on with our lives." Then his gaze dropped down to the papers strewn across his desk and he began scribbling with his pen. "I have a lot of work to do before we leave tomorrow."

Harley doesn't know why... maybe it's a defense mechanism that's making his insecurities stew in his stomach until anger is boiling over, but now he's pissed. The pounding hadn't stopped, and his jaw was tight, and he was just so *angry*. Either way, Tony's blatant disregard for his obvious distress wasn't boding so well with him and his mouth is moving again before he can get control of it.

"Why you gotta be so bitchy about it? What if it's important."

Tony looks up at him, completely unamused and 100% done. "Well, it's obviously not. Now, watch your mouth."

Harley grits his teeth together, the last of his anxiety melting into annoyance. "You're such a jerk." Harley snapped, crossing his arms over his chest.

Tony's mouth quirks down into a displeased scowl. He was *not* in the mood. "Watch it kid."

"Or what?" Harley challenges defiantly, "it's not like you're gonna actually do anything about it."

Tony's scowl slowly melts into a grim line of indifference. He sniffs and turns his head back down to the work on his desk. "Why don't you go stick your nose in the corner and cool off for a bit." It wasn't a suggestion; that much was clear.

"I'm not a child *Stark*, you--"

Before he could finish his thought, Tony was standing abruptly from his seat, looking positively furious. “You don’t get to disrespect me *child*. Know that. Now. Go stick your nose in that corner and I don’t wanna hear another peep out of you, you hear?”

“Whatever,” Harley rolled his eyes and made move to leave the room. “I shoulda known you were gonna be a dick about this. I’ll talk to you when you’re not all pissy.”

Before he can even take two steps to move, Tony’s already beside him, grabbing him by the scruff of his neck and dragging him towards the corner of the room. Harley fights him with flailing limbs and a few good kicks to his shin, but Tony’s grip on him doesn’t loosen.

A few stumbling strides later and Tony was shoving him rather harshly to the corner adjacent to his desk. Harley’s shaking with anger, but refrains from lashing out, even when Tony presses a strong hand against the back of his head and pushes his face closer to the wall. The man’s towering frame boxes him in, and he leans down to whisper in Harley’s ear.

“I want you to stand here and think about what you’ve done, you hear me? Don’t so much as twitch until I say so.” And with that he was gone, leaving Harley to tremble angrily alone in the corner.

Why did he always have to cause such trouble?

It doesn’t take longer than a couple minutes before the consuming anger is reverting back to its original form of debilitating anxiety. He feels scared and the trembling is no longer caused by anger, but by worry and humiliation. *Why did he have to be like this? Why couldn’t he just communicate in a normal way? Now Tony would surely change his mind about wanting him as their kid. Their firstborn... the one that was supposed to set the example. Tony’d be stupid to want him to be Peter and Morgan’s older brother. All he is, is trouble.*

He can’t even keep his stupid mouth shut!

And not only has he been proven to be a terrible older sibling, but now he’s stuck in a corner. Like a goddamn Baby! Tony had put him in time out! Like a child... and it was mortifying.

He wasn’t a child...

He bowed his head, his forehead coming to rest on the cold plaster of the walls. His lip trembles and he squeezes his teeth close together. It was humiliating... embarrassing. He’d thrown a pointless fit and had pissed Tony off. Now the man was never going to listen to him. He was going to be even more pissed than he would have been before, because surely he’s going to be mad at Harley for not being mature enough to communicate his worries. He didn’t even have enough control over his own emotions to stay calm.

But then there was also that small inkling of hope at the back of his mind that maybe this was like one of those cheesy lines out of a kid movie. Maybe Tony felt just as bad about punishing him as he felt about being punished. Maybe Tony would be ready to forgive him and then he could explain what was really going on... Maybe he hadn’t ruined his chances after all...

“Tony,” he croaked softly, imagining the man coming to rush to his side once hearing the distressed quiver in his voice, like he would Peter.

That didn’t happen.

“Did I give you permission to speak?” The man answered coldly, with a slight growl to his voice.

Harley's whole body cowered with a repressed sob and he squeezed his eyes shut. "No, sir," he whispered softly.

He supposed he wasn't really in a position to hope for comfort. He'd messed up... and he wasn't Peter. He couldn't be as easily forgiven.

Why did he always have to screw everything up?

Tony massaged his temple with the heels of both his palms. He was exhausted. He hadn't slept well the night before. He had spent all day yesterday riding along with the guys to go check the warehouse Hydra had ambushed them at. They had searched high and low, but they weren't able to find a thing. Then he got back, made some tweaks to JARVIS, babysat Peter in his workshop while Happy continued the previous day's work, and he helped Harley with the schoolwork he'd been assigning him to keep him up to date with his academics. All this in between going over stacks of papers and working his way through Pepper's list of things that needed to be taken care of before their departure. Then, that night... oh goodness that night had been hell. After he'd broadcasted the video via JARVIS across the globe and he'd tucked Peter into bed, came Rogers and his stupid situation which called for even more paperwork and a lot more digging into whoever the hell this Ben Reilly douche was.

Pepper, though, had been in one of her moods and he'd basically gotten kicked to the couch after making one too many snide remarks amidst his frustration. And, of course, that night Peter had at some point snuck into the living room and laid on top of him... which led to very sore ribs to accompany his achy back in the morning. The only plus side was that his knee was feeling much better and he no longer needed the stupid cane... but that was it. Other than that, yeah, bad night, bad morning, and a hellish day to follow it.

The day only seemed to drag on as it continued. He'd signed god knew how many papers sent down from Legal about the 'reunification' between him and his kids and the shit ton of information to support it. He had to make sure the accounts were in order, and that systems/operations could be maintained during his month absence. It was a lot more work than it usually was thanks to Hydra-Man and the Feds. He only hoped his little video from last night would help that matter. He'd be pissed as hell if Ross decided to send his jolly crew in to nab him or shut down his company when he gave them explicit instructions not to do so.

So, when the kid came in with nerves that quickly morphed into a displeasurable attitude, he wasn't having it. He was already stressed as hell to get work done and the kid was *not* helping.

The kid had been standing in the corner for about an hour and a half and he had only made one peep. Other than that, the kid remained stock still and silent just as Tony had ordered him. If he wasn't so pissed Tony may have even been impressed by the kid's resilience. Surely the boy's legs were screaming at him by now.

He only had a few more pages to go over before he was a free man, and he had decided he'd let the kid go when he finished. But Rhodey's abrupt appearance interrupted those plans.

The man entered quickly, steely eyes softening into confused bewilderment when he spotted the kid with his face tucked into the corner and his shoulders hunched close to his face in shame, but he didn't say a word about it.

"Tony, Richard's ready. Everything's set up for you."

Tony nods, casting a glance towards the kid then looking back at Rhodey. "Alright, let me finish

up here. I'll be there in a few." He felt the weight on his chest begin to lift. He was *finally* going to do something mildly entertaining, as morbid as that sounded.

Rhodey shot another glance to the kid's motionless form and looked back at Tony, looking just a little pissed off. "Did he talk to you?"

Tony scoffed. "He tried telling me something but chickened out. Then he started mouthing off and I wasn't in the mood to deal with it." Goodness knows how many times he's thought *that* in the past two hours.

"Rhodey," the kid squeaked helplessly, as if begging for help. Tony's head snapped over to look at him to see the kid's head turned around to look at the man. He looked utterly devastated.

"Hey. Nose back in the corner. I didn't say you could move." Tony snapped, feeling just a bit bad at the mortified downfall of the boy's face as he slowly turned his head to face the corner once more.

"Tony," Rhodey placated firmly, fixing him with a stern glare. Tony's head whipped back over to look at him. "You need to cool down and talk to the kid."

Then Rhodey left, and Tony's irritation seemed to leave with him. He felt like a jerk. He looked back over at the kid to find him with his nose tucked firmly into the corner once more. He sighed and it wasn't until he looked closer that he was able to see the poor kid's shoulders quaking. A lump formed in his throat and he found himself panicking. Was the kid *crying*? *What if he'd messed up? Should he have not been so harsh? Pepper said time outs were good punishments... well... she'd been talking about Peter at the time, but still! Had he been too unsympathetic? Or maybe he'd made the punishment too long. Oh god he didn't know how to do this.*

And then he thinks back on when FRIDAY'd told him Harley'd been pacing outside his door looking quite upset about something. He had wanted to tell him something... and Rhodey wanted him to talk to the kid...

His throat goes dry and his face pales when he realizes what Harley must have been wanting to tell him. It must have been about what Richard did... he still didn't know the extent of his involvement (Rhodey refused to tell him any more), but Tony's been perfectly fine believing the bastard was completely to blame for the death of Harley's family and he was about to make sure the man was dealt the punishment he deserved. But what if things were worse than he imagined? Or not as bad?

The kid had been trying to tell him! He was trying to tell him something important and all he did was blow him off! And for what?! Because he was a little peeved for having to do paperwork all morning?

Oh god he was a terrible father... every time he thought he had a handle on things, things just blew up in his face.

"Tony," Harley spoke again in a whisper, sounding reminiscent of earlier when Tony had not so nicely told him to shut up, "I'm really sorry."

And, yeah, okay, he's a jerk. A big fat jackass.

He falls back into his chair and rubs a hand down his face. "You're free to go, kid."

It's like he was a goddamn warden!

He expected the kid to go bolting from the room, as far away from him as he could get, but he

didn't. In fact, the kid did the exact opposite. He came sprinting towards him, cheeks red and eyes swollen, and practically collapsed on top of him, lanky arms wrapping tightly around his neck and head tucking beneath his chin despite the very awkward position it put them in.

The chair rolls back and the kid stumbles, but he doesn't let go. "I'm sorry Tony. I'm sorry- I'm sorry."

Tony flounders for a moment, trying to find his footing, and he stands slowly from the chair, so their embrace wasn't quite as cumbersome. He wraps his arms around him, gently maneuvering the boy's arms so they were wrapped around his waist instead and Tony props his chin atop his head as he slowly rubs his back, pulling him in and tucking him close.

"It's okay, It's okay. I shouldn't have been so harsh. That's my mistake."

Harley shakes his head violently, nose still pressed firmly against his sternum. He clings to Tony, desperate to be as close as possible for some god knows reason. Was this what the books meant when kids sometimes got clingy after being punished? Oh gosh... he thought that was just a load of bull to trick parents into reprimanding their kids, but apparently not! Psychology was weird as shit.

Tony lifts a hand to comb through the kid's hair gently, hoping he'd calm down so maybe the guilt would stop eating him alive. "Let's move this to the sofa, huh. Your legs are probably killing ya right now."

"No," Harley chokes, pulling away from the embrace and taking several steps back. "I-I-I need to tell you--" He coughs abruptly and draws in another strained gasp of air. Tony grabs him by the arms.

"Calm down; just breathe. Breathe, okay? You don't have to tell me right now." He'll wait... he'll wait for the kid to tell him. If him killing Richard today was what had the boy in such a rush to spill his biggest secret... then he'd wait. He'd wait till he was ready.

"No, I gotta," Harley gasps. "I gotta tell."

Tony grimaces. "Alright, alright. Let's go sit down and you tell me what you gotta tell, okay?"

Harley lets himself be led to the couch, chest constricting with anxiety. He needed to tell Tony... this was his last chance to tell him... if he didn't tell, Tony would go and kill Richard and he'd never know... he'd never know if he was really to blame for killing his mother and sister. He couldn't not know. He needed to know. He needed to tell Tony.

"Tell me what's wrong Buddy," Tony instructs gently as they sit down.

And Harley did. He told him everything. And he found that once he started, he couldn't stop.

Rhodey's loafs around in the room, arranging the various utensils on the table as he waits for Tony to make an appearance. He's hoping he was talking to the kid and that was what was taking him so long, but he can't ever be 100% sure with that man.

"Stark sure is taking his good ole time, isn't he?" Richard scowled, tugging at his bound wrists bent painfully behind him.

Rhodey's not amused. "For a guy about to be tortured then executed, you're pretty mouthy."

That shut him up, but the glare didn't soften any. So, Rhodey decided to indulge him, maybe give him a scare while he was at it.

"If you must know, he's having a little chat with the kid you traumatized. He's learning 'bout all the sick, twisted things you've done in your miserable life and he's gonna make sure you're genuinely sorry for all of it before it's dinnertime for him and his family."

"That bastard child's got nothing on me that Stark doesn't already know. He doesn't know anything. He's not even smart enough to spell his own goddamn name."

Rhodey fixed him with a menacing smirk and bowed his head back down to the tools in front of him with an innocent shrug of his shoulders. "I'm not talking about Peter."

And of course, the master of perfect timing himself swings the door open with a loud bang and comes stalking in looking positively enraged. And Rhodey would gladly admit that he found great amusement in watching Richard Parker's cool expression morph into a panicked terror.

Tony stalked towards him and he doesn't speak a word as he punches him hard in the jaw. The man barely had time to recover from the harsh blow when Tony then grabbed his face and snapped his head over, so they were looking eye-to-eye.

"I don't know what was going on through your goddamned head," he growled with a harsh bark, "but I just want you to know that you will be getting no less than what you deserve. I'm going to pull out every tooth in your mouth one by one and then I'm going to gouge out your eyes and make your eardrums bleed. I'm going to break every bone in your body, shave off every inch of skin, and tear every limb off your useless corpse until all that's left is the cowering piece of shit that you are... and you're going to feel every damn second of it. Do I make myself clear?"

An inhumanely croak rises from the back of the man's throat and Tony releases him roughly.

"Uh Tony," Rhodey interrupts, grabbing the man's attention, "I'd tone it down a notch. You got an audience." He nods towards the heavy door behind him and Tony's head whips around to settle on the kid that must have followed him when he bolted from the room in his fit of rage.

"Harley, what are you doing here?" Tony snapped. He didn't mean to snap at him, but he was seething and every bone in his body was begging him to start tearing the bastard limb from limb. A month's worth of holed up frustration and resentment was coagulating in his stomach and it made him sick thinking he had shown as much mercy to the man as he had.

Harley quivered, eyes darting between the man tied to the chair and the infuriated one in front of him. "I-I'm sorry," he choked, jaw trembling and eyes burning with water as he stared down at Richard Parker for the first time since his full clarity of mind has allowed him to place the blame on someone who wasn't only himself. "I just- I just had to see..."

Tony approached him with long strides, blocking him from Richard's burning gaze. "You shouldn't be in here kid. I'll take care of it, I promise. That's my job, remember?"

"Please," Harley begged, fresh tears falling from his already swollen eyes, mouth sticky with saliva as he forced the words through the heavy barrier of his throat. "Please sir, I gotta know why." A muted whine escaped his throat with the force of several exhales.

"Why what, kid?" Tony's eyes softened and he rubbed the kid's arms soothingly, hoping it'd help comfort him in some way.

Harley's mouth opened to answer, but the words only escaped through a pained keen. "Why he

made me do it.”

Then Harley’s pushing forward, making Tony drop his arms, and he’s pressing into his chest with soft groans of distress. Tony’s body is run ragged with shivers at the idea and he hugs the boy close with one arm. He knows he shouldn’t give him what he wants... Then he feels a hand land on his shoulder.

“You need to let him get this out of his system Tones.”

“Wha?” Tony turns to look at his best friend. “Are you kidding? That’s not something a kid should be seeing.”

“I’m not saying he needs to watch you maim him,” Rhodey placated gently, voice firm and undeterred. “I’m saying you need to let the kid beat the shit out of him.”

Always the voice of reason, Rhodey was.

Tony chuckled at the thought of letting his kinda ‘thirteen’ year old kid loose on Richard Parker. “Well that sounds fair to me. What do you think, kid? Want some hands-on experience?” He tugged gently at the collar of the kid’s shirt from behind and Harley moved away to stare up at him with wide eyes.

“R-R-Really?”

Tony grins down at him, a small smirk playing at his features. Then he twists, keeping one arm wrapped around the kid’s shoulders as he turns to face Richard. “What you think Parker? Think you’re up to being pummeled by my thirteen-year-old?”

Richard simply scowls at him as Harley mutters a quiet “*fourteen*” under his breath and runs his sleeve beneath his nose.

“Whatcha say kiddo? You up for it now, or do you want me to warm him up for you?”

Harley rubs harshly at his eyes to get rid of the burning tears and he wrinkles his nose as he sniffs. “I-um. I need a minute.”

“Great,” Tony grins, eager to get a hand on Parker as soon as possible. He hands the kid off to Rhodey and eagerly approaches Richard once more to harass him with strike after strike, from the left cheek to the right, down to his stomach and his groin. He’s sure not to leave too much of a bloody mess and keeps it somewhat lowkey so the man would have at least a bit of coherency to answer whatever questions the kid might ask him. So, by the time he has to shake out his hand and the man’s a blubbering mess, Tony steps back and turns around to see if the kid was ready.

“You ready?” Tony asks, head nodding down at the man in the chair. Harley nods and approaches slowly. “Great. I’ve broken him in fairly good the past couple weeks, so he should be pretty compliant for you. Isn’t that right Richie?”

The man groans in response and Tony grins. Harley’s at his side in a matter of seconds, wringing his hands nervously in front of him. “Umm. So... what am I supposed to do?” He questions nervously. His hand twitches and refrains from looking at Richard to avoid his heart from hammering in his chest and throwing him into another panic.

Tony claps him on the shoulder for reassurance. “Just ask him whatever questions you got and beat him senseless.”

Harley looks up at him. He looks scared, and hell, this is exactly why he didn't want Harley being exposed to things like this so young... but he needed to learn eventually, and the kid's seen worse. But that still didn't make it any easier. The kid was always so eager to learn and insist he could handle whatever Tony threw at him, but however much the kid would deny it, he was sensitive, and life hadn't treated him well. So, he was bound to have some issues when it came to things drawing up memories from his past. Tony had been trying to avoid any triggers he may have, but he supposes this is a necessary evil. Closure is necessary to end that terrible chapter in the kid's life and begin a new one with the family he and Pepper were happily trying to create.

So, Tony sighed in resignation and took the boy by both his shoulders. "Just get angry, okay? Don't be scared. He can't do anything to you anymore. Use that smart mouth of yours to piss him off like you do me, yeah." He combs a gentle hand through his hair. "Think about what he did to you and your family and think about how terrible and wrong it was. Use the anger; don't be shy; cry if you have to. He'll deserve everything you throw at him and more, okay?"

Harley nods numbly then turns to look at Richard. Tony slowly backs away to stand beside Rhodey on the other side of the room. He tells himself that he'll only step in if he has to.

"Why'd you make me kill her?" Harley begins softly, eyes dark and angry as they bore into the man in front of him.

"Kill who?" Richard spat, lolling his head to the side so he could look at the kid better.

"My Mom," Harley answered with an audible quiver in his voice.

"I did it to teach you a lesson," Richard answered blankly, eyes swollen and red as his darkened pupils glazed over the area Harley was standing.

Harley's jaw spasmed. "No, you didn't. I know you didn't! There's something else! What was it?"

"There was no reason," he groaned, "you were a brat and Norman pitied you because of your father. You needed to grow up."

"I was *twelve*," Harley croaked with anger. "I was a *child*!"

Tony wasn't so happy with the direction the conversation was going. He was almost sure Richard would have given up with keeping any secrets from him, but apparently this man was a spiteful son of a bitch. And by that last statement uttered by the man Tony was ready to jump in and cave in his face, but thankfully, Harley beat him to it before he let himself interfere.

He wasn't quite as thankful though when the kid whipped his hand away from Richard after delivering quite the blow just above his jaw. He cradled his wrist in his other hand and shook it wildly, wincing and cursing under his breath. Tony rushed forward and so did Rhodey.

"What happened, kiddo?" Tony asked, grabbing the boy's hand gently and examining it for any fractures.

Harley winced when the man's strong thumb ran over the knuckles of his ring finger and pinkie. "I-I've never punched a guy in the face that hard before." Tony looks over at Richard for a moment and his pleased to see the man slowly working his jaw around.

"Well you clipped him pretty good. Just don't punch him with these two knuckles," he grazes his thumb over the already bruising knubs. "Gotta hit 'em with this one." Then he taps his middle knuckle and smiles. "Does your wrist hurt?"

Harley smiles shyly. "I mean... it's fine. I just didn't hit him straight on--"

Tony interrupts him with a look and pinches the sides of his wrist between his fingers. He looks up at Rhodey then. "You got any wrappings to wrap his hand and wrist with?"

"You baby him Stark," Richard spat in a daze, cloudy eyes settled on them.

"Yeah?" Tony scoffs, "Well he deserves to be babied after the hell you've put him through."

Rhodey returns with some gauze and Tony slowly begins wrapping the kid's hand and wrist so his knuckles are covered. "I'm guessing Happy hasn't taught you to punch without boxing gloves yet, huh?"

Harley shrugs in embarrassment. "We've only really trained a couple times." He glances nervously back towards Richard. "Can't you, like, give him that truth serum, narcoanalytic stuff Happy's been giving the guys to find the snitch?"

Tony chuckles and shakes his head. "I like where your head's at, but no can do. This douche immunized himself... he designed the drug and Bruce just made it a little less debilitating."

"Oh," Harley whispers quietly.

"That's alright. You'll have to learn how to do it this way at some point. I'll give you a quick crash course... Just don't tell Pepper."

So, Tony maneuvers the both of them so they're standing side-by-side in front of Richard. He puts his hands up in the boxing position Harley was familiar with. Then he makes sure Harley's looking at him and holds up his right hand for emphasis.

"What the hell Stark," Richard says with a nervous and questioning undertone.

Tony ignores him and focuses on Harley.

"Get him with the middle knuckle. That'll be your sturdiest blow. You clipped him with your pinkie and ring finger knuckles and that coulda really hurt you; broke your fingers even." Then for even more emphasis he sails his fist forward to make direct contact with Richard's left eye. "And there. Best bruise you could give."

Richard groaned, hunching over as far as his restraints would allow.

Harley bounced on the balls of his feet beside him, looking a little more confident and a lot less anxious. "Can I try?"

Tony snorted and nodded his head with a small smile. Who knew watching his kid beat up his tormentor could be so much fun?

The kid hooked him in the same spot and Richard hissed sharply as the welt grew above his eye.

"Good aim, kid," Tony praised, and then he put a hand on his shoulder, "but if you want more force behind a direct jab, you're gonna have to twist your arm."

Harley squints at him in confusion.

"It's like turning a doorknob, watch." He first does it in slow motion so Harley could watch the movements, then demonstrates a little faster by socking Richard hard in the jaw. "It keeps you from spraining your elbow and it's quicker than a hook. Try it."

Richard growls at them, fed up with the casual affair they were making this out to be. The growl doesn't last long before the kid was punching him in the jaw as well.

"Perfect," Tony praises with a wide grin. "Now, just throw your weight into it. And aim for the nose and the ears. That'll do some damage and he just might give you an answer."

Harley nods and gets to work, repeatedly asking Richard the same question, and repeatedly getting the same lame response. It was making him mad if nothing else, and both Tony and Rhodey noticed.

"Why won't you tell me?!" Harley practically cried, knocking his fist right into the center of the man's mouth. His face was already bleeding fairly extensively, and Harley felt like such a failure for not getting any information out of him.

It wasn't until Harley spun around in his haze of anger to grab the knife laying on the table that Tony jumped in.

"Hey, whoa. I didn't say anything about stabbing. Just punching."

"I don't care!" Harley screamed, tears rolling down his cheeks. "He won't tell me the truth! It can't be the truth! It can't be Tony; it can't."

"Don't know what to tell ya kid." Richard gasped, spitting his bloody saliva as he spoke, most of it dribbling down his chin. "It's your fault. You messed up and you paid the consequences. That's how this life works."

Tony roughly grabs the knife out of Harley's hand and shoves it forward so the point is pressed dangerously against the tip of his nose. He looms over the man, rocking his chair back and scowling down at him.

"I'd watch your tone if I were you. You better be grateful to this kid, because if I'd had my way, you'd be begging for mercy by now. So why don't you start talking. The truth."

"I have," Richard croaks without ever breaking eye contact.

"Suit yourself," Tony smiles, slowly running the end of the knife down his face, over his lips and flicking off at the downturned curve of his chin. It leaves a good sized slit and he tosses the knife away as he turns his attention back to the kid. "How about I show you the best way to crack a man's rib cage?"

"Tony," Rhodey begins, sounding a bit hesitant, but Tony holds up a hand.

"I'm not having the kid pry out his teeth, Rhodes. Cool down. Now, watch closely, kid."

One blow knocks the air out of him, and the next Harley hears a distinct crack, and then Tony drives the heel of his flat palm into the far side of the top rib and Richard screams from deep within his chest. Harley takes a startled step back when the man throws his head back in a wail, but he quickly recovers and listens aptly when Tony gives him instruction.

"Now do it with one punch you'd have to apply about 4,000 Newtons to fracture the rib, but most average guys can only get up to 'bout a thousand. So, nothing against you kid, but I don't think you could pull the 4,000 mark just yet. So, just do what I did. Keep your feet steady and balanced. First blow to the middle inseam to weaken, then a direct blow, and then a swift jab to the side of the rib for a full fracture. You gotta be quick about it or else it won't work, but he's already been pretty beat up so it shouldn't take much effort."

“Okay-okay,” Harley nodded quickly, taking a couple deep breaths to ready himself.

“Tony,” Rhodey tries again, but, again, Tony stops him with a single hand.

“Go ahead kid.”

Harley repeats exactly as Tony did to Richard’s opposite side. He doesn’t hear a crack on the second blow like he did on Tony’s, but on the last hit he definitely heard *something*. He couldn’t hear it well over Richard’s yelp of pain, but it was something. “Did you hear that?!” He asked excitedly, turning up his head to look at Tony for approval.

Tony grins and laughs triumphantly as if the kid had hit a homerun at his first mini league baseball game. He ruffles his hair. “Sure did. Sounds like your first cartilage tear. Awesome job!”

Maybe it was because Howard never praised him for a job well done, but he felt every victory needed to be celebrated, because his kid was one step away from a fracture and that was freaking amazing for a *not-officially* thirteen-year-old kid.

“Really?” And Harley looked so gosh darn happy to be receiving the praise and Tony’s just glad he wasn’t crying anymore.

“Of course. Why don’t you try again? A couple more hits might make it a full fracture... unless Richard wants to start talking now.”

Harley turns to face the man in question, hoping that maybe it might have worked, but Richard only scowled at him.

“What’s the point, Stark? As soon as I open my mouth and the kid gets what he wants, you’ll have your way with me... and I die. That’s not a logical move on my part and you know it. So, let’s make a deal, hm?”

Tony snarls... he wished he still had that knife to drive between the fractured bones of his ribs and *twist...*

“I’m done making deals with you Parker. You’ve eaten up my patience, and I’m tired of it. Either way you’re dying tonight. It’s up to you how long I draw it out for.”

Harley glances between the two of them.

“I’m not saying shit Stark. If you really *love* your fake kid that much, you’d trade my life for the information he obviously wants. What means more to you Tony... your child’s closure or my head?”

Tony doesn’t falter with a retort. “I think my child’s closure depends on your head, Parker. And I think you underestimate my skill of prying information out of people.”

“And you underestimate my determination, Stark. I have nothing left to say to that bastard of a child,” his head nods in Harley’s direction and for a second Tony thinks he might lose his cool again, but he doesn’t.

“Alright, Richard. I’ll give the kid however long he wants to continue beating the crap out of you. Then we’ll make a deal, yeah?”

“Sounds good, Stark.” Then Richard’s head bobs back towards Harley, looking numb and delusional with his triumphant bloody grin. “Gimme your worst kiddo.”

And Harley does. By the time he's finished with him, he's panting and the wrappings around his hand were stained red with blood, as well as the exposed portion of his fingers and wrist. The man's face was practically caved in, his nose was surely broken, and he'd even tried breaking a few more ribs. Sometimes it worked sometimes it didn't, but he had once more been so overcome with anger that he lost track of time.

He felt a hand rest on his shoulder as he stood back to stare at his handy work to really appreciate the job he'd done.

"Sure did give him hell, didn't ya kiddo," Tony whispered softly, pulling the boy close to his side when he saw the anger slowly dissipate and spawn frustrated tears in his eyes. He combed a hand through the kid's sweaty hair and pulled him away slowly. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks Tony," Harley replied in a hoarse whisper and a tired smile.

Tony smiled back and reached for the boy's hands and began unwrapping the bloody gauze. "Let's get you outta these and get you some water while the bastard catches his breath." Tony glances over at Richard's wheezing form, bloodied and bruised from Harley's beating. "You're just a little natural at everything, aren't ya, Ace."

Harley's smile only grows at the praise. Then Rhodey appears beside Tony, also grinning as he forces the plastic cup of ice water into the kid's hands. "Yep. I saw him boxing with Happy earlier... the kid's picking up pretty good."

Tony grins, looking down at the kid with a suggestive raise of his brows. "Oh really? Does that mean we're due a rematch soon?"

"Yes!" Harley grins, bouncing excitedly on his toes as Tony peels off the rest of the wrappings. "Can we do it soon?"

Tony chuckles. "Soon, Bud. Cool your jets. We've still got a bit of work to do."

"Oh yeah," Harley looks back over at Richard. "Do you think he'll actually say anything??" Harley nervously chews his lip. "He didn't... He didn't sound like he'd tell earlier."

"I got ways to persuade him if he doesn't."

"But-" Harley starts protesting once more, but Tony shushes him with a hand over the mouth.

"Shush. Don't worry. I won't let the truth die with him, alright? Trust me kid, I'll take care of it."

Harley nods.

Tony tosses the messy wrappings onto the table and approaches Richard slowly.

"Alright, buddy," Tony sighs patronizingly. "Let's get on with this... As much as I hate to do it, I'll only beat you within an inch of your life today, instead of killing you outright. And I'll give you a month to recover while I'm outta the country. Then I'll come back and take care of you once and for all."

"You keep threatening to kill me Stark, yet here I am, still alive," the man chuckles, both eyes swollen shut, but still smug as ever. Tony growls under his breath. "I'm starting to think you're too scared."

"Take it or leave it before I make Bruce concoct his own ridiculous truth serum and *then* kill you."

“Alright, alright.” Richard relented with a tired groan as he adjusts in his seat. “The night I went to the kid’s house I had just killed Peter’s mother.”

Tony growled.

“Found out she cheated on me and the bastard child wasn’t even mine.” His eyes narrowed into slits and his nostrils flared and he turned his blank gaze up at Tony. “So, you can’t blame me for being a bad father, Stark, when I wasn’t one to begin with.”

“Who is Peter’s father?” Tony questions instead of indulging the man’s deflection technique, suddenly worried by the chance of someone stepping all over his plans to claim the kid as his own. If Peter’s real Dad were to step in... he’d have to kill him.

Richard looks between all three of them and groans softly before closing his eyes and leaning back in his chair.

“My brother.”

“Name!” Tony growled. “I need a name.”

“Not that you’d be able to find him,” Richard sighed, “he’s changed his name too many times to count. The guy’s unstable.”

“What’s his name?”

“Ben Parker.”

Tony turns away with a deep growl rumbling at the back of his throat, just about to whip out his phone and dial up his people meant to take care of the situation, but then he sees Harley’s face. He looked confused and distraught at the lack of a direct answer. So, Tony lowers the phone back to his pocket and stands up straight.

“What does this have to do with Harley?”

Richard’s eyes open to roll onto Harley. “He’s your father, Keener... well... you’re not really a Keener, are ya?” He chuckled under his breath at the look in the boy’s eyes. “Yeah, you’re a Parker kid... I’m your Uncle Richard. And your father made a mistake... so I had to make sure his family paid the debt he owed me, and you had to fill his place. Had to make sure someone was there to take care of your bastard brother so I wouldn’t have to.”

The shit eating grin on Richard Parker’s face was the last thing Harley saw before he ran from the room with no recollection of any other questions he may or may not have had for him.

Chapter End Notes

Right so I’ve been planning this chapter for a long time and I’m so excited I was finally able to execute it. I know we’ve been focusing on Harley lately, but I just had to make a full circle with his issues before I started focusing on something else... so now the pointless family fluff can commence for the next couple chapters while the fam is on vaca. Or at least sometimes soon lol

Also, a little something... I’ll be introducing two new lovely characters once we hit

Italy. And it will be quite the adventure XD

Lemme know your thoughts! I love hearing from you guys :)

Thank you for reading

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Finally! Another chapter! Hope you guys are doing well and keeping safe.

Btw, the *italicized* dialogue represents when someone is speaking in Italian.

Hope y'all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So, Thaddeus. Care to explain why Anthony has felt the need to claim those two boys as his illegitimate children?”

Ross clears his throat and glances towards the closed door as he sits at his desk in the oval office, accompanied by the copious amount of papers that was beginning to pile up thanks to this apparent national “state of emergency” in response to the tension growing between Stark and Hydra. “I’m assuming it’s a way to dampen the consequences of a kidnapping claim in court, sir.”

The man on the other line hums in annoyance. “I thought I told you to find no courts and to find a way to quash Anthony’s attachment, and now he’s *one*, going to court, and *two*, adopting them?!”

“Well, it isn’t entirely my fault,” Ross defends himself, back going erect in his uneasiness. “I had Allen frame the Keener boy of working for you so he would just dismiss both the children and avoid a trial all together, but Stark ended up working himself up over it. He flew off his rocker and... rumor has it he attempted suicide because of it, sir... Allen had been sparse with the details over the phone. Stark is taking security measures much more seriously--”

“He *what* ?!”

Ross gulped, hating to admit that his skin tingled just a bit at the older man’s guttural growl. “He tried killing himself, sir. I’m sorry--”

“I heard you the first time, you *idiot* .” The man snapped in a low tone before his voice was raising in volume once more. “That coward! I should’ve known this would happen. This attachment he has to these children will only prove to be a detriment to him. And *you* . Don’t push the line with him, he’s been unstable since he found out about Obadiah. If he’s killed, his blood will be on your hands and I will *not* be pleased.”

Ross remains silent, eyes glazing over the room for a moment before he’s bowing his head and lowering his gaze to his desk once more.

“I should have killed you instead of Obadiah; he would have had the job done by now. Do I have to do everything myself?”

“Sir, please, just give my contacts a little more time. Norman has a plan. All we need is to get Parker out of there and we can set the plan in motion. It’ll knock Stark on his ass and you won’t have to worry about those two boys interfering any longer...”

He was met with silence and then an exasperated sigh.

“I suppose I must let you learn from your mistakes first. All I ask is you make sure Richard finishes his work before confronting Anthony. Also, it is ill-advised to try anything while Anthony is still in Italy. That is a sacred place for the Stark family; and he has too much power there for you to ever gauge any parameter of success.”

“We will not let you down sir,” Ross promises stoically.

“You will,” the man replies with certainty, “but I will allow you to try despite your inevitable failure.”

“Would you like me to take care of his wife and child?”

There was a lengthy pause as the man deliberated over the matter. “No,” he responded eventually. “No, we must preserve the Stark line. After the child is finished nursing there may be need to take care of Ms. Potts. Perhaps that will finally teach him the lesson he should have learned years ago if he still proves to be distracted. But we’ll leave her alone for the time being. Focus on the boys. They need to go before Stark hands over his entire legacy to two incompetent bastard children.”

“Ok, I understand, sir,”

"In the meantime, please have Ben Reilly contact me. We have much to discuss about his recent failures to incapacitate a certain young boy.”

Ross feels a hard lump growing in his throat. “Of-of course sir.”

Tony’s eyebrows furrow in worry as he watches Harley sprint from the room. Then he turns his head to settle his scathing glare back on Richard Parker. “You better be so glad I’m a man of my word, Parker.”

“I’ve done nothing to warrant your anger Stark,” Richard mutters through a heavy cough. “It’s my brother you should be conspiring against. He’s the one that beat the boy and his sister half to death every night. I did nothing but care for him and his family when his father left. I’ve provided more than I had to for both of my nephews Stark. I’m the only reason they’re still alive today.”

“Stop feeding yourself lies to make yourself feel better about what you’ve done, you dick,” Rhodey muttered. His arms crossed over his chest and his eyes narrowed in anger.

Richard scowled at him. “I’ve done nothing but good for those boys! You don’t know the half of it!”

Tony takes a step forward. “Then why don’t indulge us then?”

Richard’s nostrils flare as he contemplates the offer. He glances between both men erratically then puffs out a short breath. “All I’ve done is protect them. Sure, I got angry sometimes, but doesn’t every man? I kept them alive for two years after I found out about what my brother did to me, my wife, and OsCorp. I had every right to kill them; rid the earth of his bastard spawn, but I *didn’t*. I gave Harley a home, a job, and a sense of purpose, and I gave Peter a father.”

“Shut the hell up,” Tony growls, taking a threatening step forward. “You’ve got a twisted sense of morality Parker if you think what you did was good for them. You kept them around for appearances, to add another number to your long list of incompetent minions.”

Richard flashes him a coy grin. “What can I say, Stark. They’re smart and devious. Wasting good genes like that wouldn’t have been wise on my part.”

Tony's nostrils flared angrily at the man's flippant remarks against his children... "You gave up something great Parker, know that. Those boys will grow to be all you could have been and more." He turns to Rhodey, expression skillfully blank of any anger from earlier. "I'll be back down to beat him to hell soon. I need to go make sure the kid doesn't end up hurting himself or something..."

He ignores whatever it was Richard was trying to goad him with as he left and headed in the direction of his private elevator. He's gonna make that man regret everything he'd ever done and he's going to shred him of every inch of his dignity until all that's left is a pitiful crying lump of shit.

He rode the elevator up to the penthouse floor where JARVIS said the elevator had deposited Harley a few moments earlier. He stepped out of the lift and glanced around the empty and quiet expanse of his Living Room.

"Where's Harley, JARVIS."

"He is in his room with Master Peter, sir," the AI answered.

So, Tony made his way down the hall to the boys' shared room. The door was left slightly ajar, and he gently pushed it open and peeked inside. What he saw made his heart twist painfully in his chest. Whether it was out of pity or bliss, he wasn't sure. He's only glad that Harley has some semblance of family left to cling to.

Harley sat on the floor, legs spread and bent at the knees in a near upright fetal position. Peter stood in front of him, between his parted legs as the older boy hugged him tightly around his waist. Harley's back was hunched over so his head could rest against Peter's tiny shoulder as he repeatedly whispered "I'm sorry" over and over and over again through his breathless gasps for air.

Peter took it like a champ. He remained unbothered as he gently stroked his little fingers through his brother's sweaty curls. His tiny arms were wrapped loosely around the older boy's neck in a protective embrace and his cheek rested against the top of his head as he whispered quiet assurances over Harley's repeated apologies.

"It's 'kay, Ha'ley. It's 'kay. I love you."

Tony stood silently to watch them, tears pricking at his eyes. He observes for a couple more moments before he slowly backs away from the door, not wanting to intrude on the intimate moment between the two brothers. He pulls the door shut, leaving it open a crack just as it had been.

"Inform me right away if either of them becomes any more distressed," Tony instructs his AI's firmly.

"Of course, sir," JARVIS responds.

And, well, if Harley doted on Peter the rest of the night, he didn't mention it.

"Up, up, up!" Tony shouts, swinging the boys' bedroom door open and slapping his palm against the plastered wall beside it before flicking the light switch on and off obnoxiously. "C'mon sleeping beauties we gotta go."

Peter whines, and Harley growls from where he has now buried his face beneath his pillow, both

pulling their comforters over their heads. "It's 3 in the morning Tony," the teen mumbles.

"Oh c'mon don't be like that," Tony rolls his eyes, "we're going on vacation, remember? You're supposed to be happy."

"Oh yeah!" Peter exclaims joyfully, bolting up in his bed, looking straight at Tony with wide eyes and a grinning mouth as his wild untamed curls stuck up every which way. "We goin' on 'cation!"

"That's the spirit," Tony chuckled, helping the little boy untangle from his sheets before he hurt himself by thrashing around the way he was. "Rhodey's made you some special blueberry pancakes. Go eat then come back so I can brush your teeth and do your hair." Peter bolts from the room, all squeals, and shouts despite the ridiculously early hour, but Harley doesn't budge. His back was to Tony, blanket hiked up to his neck and Tony sighs.

"C'mon Ace. We gotta get going." He sits down on the edge of the kid's bed and settles a heavy hand on his shoulder instead of combing it through his tangled mess of hair peeking out from the blanket as was his first instinct. *Gosh when did he become such a softy ?*

"I don't wanna go."

Tony pursed his lips. "Is this Harley talking, or is this angsty teenager talking?"

"No," Harley growled, "this is depressed, emotionally manipulated, and traumatized human being talking."

"Oh, I see," Tony indulges with a contemplative undertone, "I've yet to officially meet him. Though, he can't be as charming as the old Harley I'm sure."

At that Harley rolls off his side far enough so he could glare at him. "Are you really going to downplay what happened?"

"No, I'm balancing out your exaggerated up-play."

Harley scowls at him and flops back over so his back is to him once more. "My reaction is perfectly normal for a person going through an identity crisis thank you very much."

"You're not having an identity crisis," Tony sighs in slight exasperation.

"Yeah? Well, screw you."

Tony's grip on his shoulder tightens slightly as he musters the patience to keep from lashing out. He closes his eyes and pushes out a deep sigh before opening them again.

"Your identity hasn't changed and you're most definitely not having a crisis. You are Harley Stark. That's who you've always meant to be and now and that's who you'll always be. That will never change no matter whose blood you got; no question about it. So, c'mon, get up. Stop sulking and let's go have some breakfast so we can get going, yeah?"

Harley groans and Tony stands from the bed, smacking him in the shoulder insistently. "Why can't you just let me lay here and wallow in my own self-pity."

"Because I'm goddamn ready to get outta this shithole country and my wife refuses to leave without you. So, let's hustle."

Tony left the room, and Harley groaned then rolled off the bed.

“I see it! I see it! I see it!” Peter cheers, bouncing excitedly on Tony’s knee as he peers out his window on the private jet to see the earlier blank slate of blue sky filled with green mountains and the discolored whites and oranges of the city. He cranes his head back to look at Tony for confirmation. “Is that it? Is that it?”

Tony grins wide for what seems like the first time in a while as he strokes a gentle hand through the boy’s hair. “It sure is, kiddo. These are our roots, our people. And you’re gonna love it here.” He glances up at Harley, sitting in the seat across from them, staring out his own window with a small smile creeping across his face for the first time that day. “Both of you will.”

Harley looks at him, feeling Tony’s gaze on him, and he smiles softly before turning his gaze back out to the view outside.

Tony stands with Peter and sits the boy back in his seat before buckling him in and sitting back down in Peter’s old seat between him and Pepper. The kid looked too enraptured in the view to move him away.

Pepper grabs his hand when he sits and leans her head against his shoulder. Tony cranes his neck to kiss the top of her head.

Things remain quiet and peaceful until the plane jolts as it touches down on the tarmac and Peter releases a celebratory squeal, thrashing wildly in his seat. “We’re here! We’re here!”

Tony chuckles and reaches over to unclasp his belt and Peter immediately darts towards the luxury couch at the back of the jet, jumping on and off and sprinting frantic circles around the entire cabin. Tony supposes most kids his age would be reacting the same way after being cooped up in a jet for 7 hours.

He made sure to keep a tight grasp on the boy’s hand as they descended the stairs of the jet. Then he hands off the kid to Harley after depositing them both next to the limo waiting on the tarmac and rushing back up to help Pepper down.

Clint and Natasha, who Happy had chosen to fly ahead and accompany them for the duration of their trip, rushed up after him and Pepper to fetch their things. As Asher remained on guard at the car, wearing a black suit and a stoic frown.

Pepper and Tony approach the pair of boys waiting beside Asher at the limo. Peter’s still bouncing, grinning huge as he watches them as well as everything else around him. Harley’s hand remains tight around the younger one’s. Tony helps Pepper carefully step into the limousine then leans back to gesture the two boys in as well.

“Alright, c’mon you two knuckleheads. In you go.”

And if the boys happen to spend the half hour drive to HQ taking turns sticking their heads out the sunroof, oh well. He was just glad he didn’t have to worry about snipers on rooftops as they rode through the streets. This was his hometown, his turf. They were safe. No one was going to bother him and his family out here. He doubts even Hydra has the balls to target him out here.

The vehicle pulled to a stop in front of a familiar and fairly tall building lined beside the smaller dwellings. Tony grinned as he stepped out the door of the sleek limousine that Natasha was holding open for him. He pulled together the flaps of his suit jacket to button the pieces together before reaching up to adjust the sunglasses on his face. He glances to either side of him, at the row of cultured and colorful buildings lining the brick road. He raises a hand to wave at the familiar citizens smiling and waving happily in his direction from their balconies and bikes.

“Antonio!” A certain pudgy man exclaimed from down the road, rushing towards him to wrap his arms around him in a crushing hug. Then grasping either side of his head to pull him down and kiss both his cheeks in a customary greeting Tony hadn’t realized he missed so dearly.

He heard the familiar sound of a car door slamming, but he paid no attention to it. Then, one moment he was greeting an old family friend, and the next, he was being torn away by Romanoff herself as she sized up the flour-covered man with a scowl on her face and a hand reaching for the weapon Tony knew was hidden behind her back.

Tony frowned and forcefully grabbed her shoulder, pulling her away from his old friend with a sharp tug. “There’s no need for that.” He scolded lightly as she forced her shoulder out of his grip. He let her and turned back to his friend with an apologetic smile. “I apologize Domencio.” The man does nothing but grin, completely undeterred by Natasha’s threatening demeanor, as he then turns to the woman and reaches out to grab her hand.

Tony laughs as she stiffly allows the man to kiss the back of her hand, before quickly pulling it away. “Natasha, this is Domencio Artino. He’s an old family friend and he owns the bakery down the street, and a winery a while drive from here” he turns back to Domencio. “*How is business these days, old friend?*” He speaks in flawless Italian with a natural accent flow that could rival any native.

“*Quite well, quite well, Antonio,*” he grins, “*I wasn’t expecting you so soon. I can’t believe I had to find out from Emilia of all people! Now where is dear Virginia? I missed her dearly.*”

Tony turns, gesturing for Natasha to open the door she had slammed closed moments earlier. She frowns at him, and as Tony should have been expecting, both his boys nearly tumbled out onto the sidewalk when Natasha tugged open the door they were pressed against rather abruptly. He could hear Pepper laughing from inside the cabin. “I *told* you not to lean on the door boys.”

“Antonio,” Domencio gasped, speaking in broken English, taking a step forward, “who is this?” Then he’s looking back at Tony and is speaking in rapid Italian once more. “*Are these your boys Emilia said you mentioned in your video?*”

Tony nods his head and leans over to help fix the boys so they’re standing upright. “Yes,” he grabs Peter’s hand and gently tugs him forward. “This is Peter.” Then he grabs Harley and does the same. “And this is Harley.” He keeps one arm wrapped around Harley’s shoulder and rests his other hand on Peter’s chest as the boy leans backwards against his legs, clinging to his arm, as he stares wide-eyed up at the chubby man speaking weird words in front of him.

“Boys this is Zio Domencio.”

Peter cranes his head back to look up at him in confusion, but then Domencio was speaking again and grabbing the boy’s attention. “Oh, it is so good to meet you Pietro! And you Ha’ley! You both look just like ya father!” The older man leans forward to squeeze both Peter’s cheeks and then cup the boy’s face to kiss his forehead. He makes move to do the same to Harley, but the boy immediately takes a step back with a panicked look in his eyes.

Domencio throws his head back and laughs.

Tony laughs too and nudges Harley with his shoulder. Then he turns around to take over Natasha helping Pepper step out of the limo. She was already grinning and reaching out for Domencio by the time she was on her feet.

“Oh *Domencio! It has been too long .*” Pepper reaches for him to greet him with a kiss and

Domencio happily obliges. When they break away, his hands fall to land on her belly and he smiles so bright it was nearly blinding, looking up at Tony. He turns to look up at Tony with a gasp.

“Antonio! Tre bambini?! *You need to visit more instead of just sending Jimmy all of the time. I am missing out on everything.*” He throws his hands up in the air in mild exasperation and then points a playfully accusatory finger at Tony. “*Just you wait until I tell Emilia! You will never hear the end of it.*”

Pepper smiles. “*Why don’t you two come over for dinner sometime this week?*” She turns to Natasha. “Have someone arrange for Domencio and Emilia to visit our villa for dinner in a few days.”

“*Oh, yes,*” Domencio agrees, “*I will bring the good wine. It is one of my best sellers!*”

“Mrs. Stark, your villa is not supposed to be allowed access to the public. It is for your own safety-”

“It’s quite alright, Romanoff,” Tony interrupts with a smile. “Domencio might as well be family despite however many times he’s declined to join the family business. This place is different from the states. There is no need to be so suspicious of everyone. Everyone here is our friend.” He gestures to the small parade passing by them, instead of crowding, and he waves to them as they shout out happy greetings. “We are safer here than any other place. These people know how to respect privacy.”

Natasha grumbles under her breath and moves towards the trunk where Clint was busy grabbing their bags from the trunk.

“*Are you not staying at your usual home down near the coastal vineyard?*” Domencio asked Pepper curiously.

“*No, we bought a new home a ways down the street near the old Cromby Orchard. Tony wanted more yard space for the boys to run around and have fun. We haven’t seen it ourselves, so we’re all very excited. We’re going up to see it tomorrow. It’s not quite ready for us tonight so we decided to stop here for the night to say hi to everyone while a few of the guys fixed it up.*”

Pepper and Domencio continue their conversation and Tony offers a few words to the conversation at some points where it is appropriate. Then he feels a small tug on his pants, and he glances down to see Peter looking up at him with his arms raised in an insistent gesture to be held. So, Tony picks him up, expecting the boy to rest his head on his shoulder and go to sleep after their long day of travelling and the drastic time change, but instead he cups his small hand around Tony’s ear and whispers softly. “Why is Mama and you talking so weird to that man?”

Tony laughs, patting the boy on the leg and pressing a loving kiss to his cheek. “That’s called a different language, buddy. We usually speak English in New York, but now we’re in Italy. So, we speak Italian.”

Peter’s lip juts out in a pout and he crosses his arms over his chest in either frustration or distress. Tony wasn’t sure. “But I don’t know how to speak that.”

“Well I don’t either Peter,” Harley pipes up quickly to reassure him. Hand lifting to comfort him by stroking his small back, “so we’re kinda in the same boat here.”

“Don’t worry,” Tony says, “I’ll make sure you both learn your fair share while you’re here.”

“That’s right!” Pepper pipes up, turning away from her conversation with Domencio to kiss Peter

on the cheek as well. “And maybe Zio Domencio will tell you all about Italy when he comes to visit us. And maybe if you ask nicely, he’ll tell you some fun stories about Daddy when he was a little boy like you.”

“Well, doesn’t that sound like a ball,” Tony replied sarcastically, giving only half his attention as he coached Clint on which bags they needed for the night stay. “But why don’t we head in and get settled. You’re not supposed to be on your feet for this long Pepper.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Pepper nodded, hand braced against her abdomen. “*We’ll speak soon Domencio.*” She kissed the shorter man on both cheeks and allowed herself to be guided into the extravagant building Tony was herding her into. Harley followed them, as did both Natasha and Clint with their bags as Asher went to go park the car.

“I can’t believe I’ve been demoted to toting around bags,” Harley could hear Clint mutter under his breath as he shouldered his way through the door behind Natasha who had seamlessly squeezed past the guards without a hitch.

Harley chuckled, craning his head around to watch Natasha berate him as he clumsily banged Pepper’s heavy overnight bag into one of the pillars by accident.

It was pretty funny.

“Shut up,” she hissed, “at least I bailed you outta the quarantine floor and saved you from a month of boredom and shunning. Stop complaining.”

Clint childishly stuck his tongue out at her. “It’s just ‘cause Hogan’s got a crush on you that we got to come and you know it.”

Harley’s eyes bug out in surprise.

Happy’s crushing on Natasha??

“Harley!” His head whips back around when Tony yells his name. “Catch up kid. Stick with us or you’ll get lost.”

Harley speeds up his pace to fall in line beside Tony and Pepper. Peter looked about ready to conk out on Tony’s shoulder. Then Tony turns to one of their escort guards and smiles. “*Why don’t you help Romanoff and Barton get those bags upstairs to our rooms in one piece?*” He nods his head in the direction of the pair several yards behind them as they come to a stop at what appears to be a blank wall.

“Sì, signore,” the man replies with a genuine smile.

Then the wall parts away into a small room that Harley assumes to be a very large elevator. He hears Peter’s gasped whisper of “*Whoa*” and he has to keep himself from gawking as well.

“*Would you like to go straight up to your rooms, sir, or would you care to go down and convene on the common floor with everyone?*”

“Take us up first, Sneakers. *I’ll go down once I have Pepper and the boy’s situated. You did have two extra rooms prepared, correct?*”

“Sì, signore.” Then with that, the doors to the elevator close and they’re making their ascent.

“Is JA’VIS here?” Peter questioned, lifting his head from Tony’s shoulder and glancing up at the

ceiling. “We didn’t tell JA’VIS where to go, Daddy.”

“No, we have *VISIONE* here. He doesn’t talk like JARVIS does, but he’s always listening in case you need something.”

Peter’s nose scrunches adorably in confusion. “Wha’s Vizz-vizy-vizone?”

“You can Just call him VISION kiddo. And JARVIS is weaved into his mainframe, so if you really need to talk to him, he’ll be there, alright? I’ll even set up a nice little watch for you to wear so you can talk to him whenever you want.”

Peter’s head flops back against his shoulder. “Okay.”

As the boys are off exploring their rooms Tony helps Pepper to bed, gently tucking the blankets around her and adjusting the pillows behind her head so she could nap comfortably.

“Are you good? Do you need anything? You thirsty? Hungry? You’re not feeling too tired are you, I know we’ve had a long day.”

Pepper reaches up to cup his face/ Then she draws him down to her so she could give him a soft kiss. “I’m fine, Honey. I promise. If anything, I’m feeling as relaxed as I’ve ever been.”

Tony grins against her mouth and kisses her again, slow, and deep as his tongue slips into her mouth. He braces one hand on her hip and slides down to sit on the edge of the mattress, other hand lifting to cup the side of her jaw and crane her head up for a better angle. Her moans are soft and quiet as always, and they drive him absolutely wild.

“Pepper,” he breathes harshly against her cheek, breathing her all in, before locking their lips together once more. “Light of my life,” he whispers. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Pepper whispers back. Then she shifts slightly to reach her hand up and thread her fingers through her husband’s hair, lips throbbing and lungs stinging as he kisses her again and again and again with a heated urgency that hadn’t been there in the beginning.

Then, he’s moving. He doesn’t break from their kiss as he lifts himself from his perch on the bed and arches his back to throw one leg over hers so he’s effectively straddling her, pinning her down while being careful of her very pregnant belly. He breaks away for only a moment to rise to his knees and he’s back at it, grabbing for her wrists to pin them above her head.

“Tony,” she laughs into his mouth, turning her head away from him to break the kiss that was quickly getting out of hand. But his hunger for her is insatiable apparently and he continues his ministrations along her neck and across her collarbone. “Tony, stop,” she giggles, pulling at her wrists to escape his hold. She feels the sharp bristles of his goatee drag across the sensitive column of her throat and she moans. “Oh my god you gotta stop,” she hissed, “the kids could come in at any second.”

“I really don’t give a shit,” Tony growls against her skin, roughly forcing her wrists back in place against the mattress.

“Tony!” She scolds.

“I’ll just have VISION lock the door for a few minutes. They won’t even know the difference.”

Pepper huffs, then squeals loudly when Tony suddenly bites down on her earlobe... *her ears had*

always been sensitive . Tony quickly releases one of her wrists to slap a hand over her mouth and he chuckles low and deep within his throat as a dark, teasing smile passes over his face. “Honey, for this to work you’re gonna have to be quiet.”

“Tony, what has gotten into you?” Pepper hisses in delight when he nips at her collar.

“It’s the city of Love, my dearest,” he answers huskily, kissing his way up to her chin and back to her lips.

Pepper laughs against his mouth. “I’m pretty sure you’re thinking of Paris, Tony. Last I checked we’re not in France.”

“Mhm, not too sure about that.”

“Tony,” Pepper gently pushes at his chest, “this is the absolute worst time to be doing this and you know it. If Peter tries coming in and the door is locked, he’s gonna cry his goddamn eyes out.”

Tony’s eyes close and he breathes out slowly. “I love it when you curse. Say it again.”

“Tony!” Pepper slaps him on the chest. “Later.”

“But I’m horny *now* , Pepper.” He whines petulantly. “This is the first time in forever we’ve been along together and weren’t completely exhausted.”

“Tonight,” she promises, a small smile inching across her face as she slowly wrapped her arms around his neck, “after the boys have gone to bed we can get up to all the debauched love-making you desire.”

Tony kisses her again which is followed by a quiet sigh. “A new country, in a new building, in a new room all by himself almost guarantees we’ll be having a bunkmate tonight Pepper.”

She pulls him down for one more soft kiss. “Mmm, well if we do it right after you put him down for bed, that should buy us an hour or so.”

Tony pumps his eyebrows obnoxiously and carefully begins to climb off her.

“*Now* who’s the horny one.”

She scoffs at him and waves him away. “Get out of here before I change my mind.”

“Alright, alright, I’m going.” He fixes his clothes and fusses over his hair for a moment before making his way towards the double doors leading out. “I’ll be back soon, my love.” He blows her a quick kiss then opens one of the doors just in time to hear the excited patter of tiny feet running down the hall.

“*Daddy, daddy! Look at my new toy!*”

“So, do you guys both like your rooms okay?” Tony asked as they rode the elevator down several floors... which kinda freaked Harley out a bit considering they were already pretty close to the bottom floor to begin with. He supposes he’s just used to the Tower and going up and up and up whenever he gets in an elevator. Maybe this place just goes down and down and down instead. Which he supposed made sense since it seemed all the rooms on the upper floors were for personal use.

“Yeah!” Peter shouted with a bright grin; he waved his new toy robot towards Tony as if to prove

it. "I got so many cool toys! And books too."

"Well that's good to hear. What about you, Ace?" He turns to Harley and the boy nods stiffly.

"Of course, yeah. It's awesome. It's-It's really big too." The teen doesn't sound very enthusiastic and it was easy to spot the forced smile that spread slowly across his face.

"Well we wanted to make sure you got your own space. But don't get too settled in. Tonight's probably gonna be the only night you two are gonna stay the night here. We're gonna head out tomorrow afternoon to get settled in our new villa."

Peter tugs on his hand to get his attention. "What's that?"

"It's a house, Petey. It has a yard and a pool and everything. You boys will love it."

"Cool," Harley nods, placing a hand over his mouth as he yawns. "Where we goin' now?"

Tony cocks his head to shoot him a wink and a coy smile. "We're going to the dining area to eat dinner with everyone. They're all jumping at the bit to meet you two."

"What? Why?"

If Tony wasn't mistaken, he'd say Harley sounded a bit panicked.

"Well, they're bound to wanna meet the new Stark Princes."

"I don' wanna be a princess!" Peter immediately argued. His face screwed up in frustration before melting into a mischievous smile. "I wanna be a King!" He thrusts the robot fisted in his hand into the air to enunciate his declaration.

Tony throws his head back and laughs. He ruffles the boy's hair. "One day Buddy. I promise."

The elevator doors slide open and Tony steps out with Peter's hand in his.

"Nice of you to finally make an appearance Stark," a smooth, familiar voice greets them. Tony smiles at his old friend and holds out a hand to shake which the man happily obliged to.

"Well, I've missed you too, Loki. It's nice to see you." Tony replied sarcastically, pulling the slim man into a quick hug, and slapping him on the back before pulling away.

Loki chuckled and looked down at Peter who was smiling up at him shyly, one arm wrapped around Tony's leg.

"Well, hello there young Stark," a grin spreads across his face and then he glances towards Tony. "Which boy is this one?"

"This one is Peter," Tony answers, the corner of his mouth lifting as he looks down at the kid too.

"So that means you must be Harley." Tony turns his head to look at where Loki's words and gaze was directed. Harley stood a couple feet behind him and he beckoned the kid closer with a slight nudge of his chin. The kid obeys and sticks out his arm to shake Loki's hand.

"Yes' sir."

"You picked a polite one, Stark. You sure he can live up to your nasty reputation?" Loki teased.

Tony snorted and released Peter's hand to reach over and pull Harley closer by wrapping his arm around the kid's shoulders. "He's a brat once you get to know him, trust me. Aren't ya kid?"

Harley rolls his eyes, but a smile creeps across his face. "Whatever makes ya feel better, old man."

Loki throws his head back and laughs and waves them along to follow him. "Everyone's waiting for you. Come on."

Loki leads them right up to a pair of fancy double doors that are at least two Harley's high. "Wow."

Then Loki pushes one of the doors open and immediately the commotion inside could be heard. Chanting, hollering, laughing, the whole nine yards. Harley hesitates at the threshold, but Tony walks right on through with a pleased smile on his lips. The main floor was a story below and the wide doors let them out on a second-floor landing with a wide arcing staircase leading down like they were in a castle. Heck, so far, the whole place was like a castle.

Tony continues forward to lean against the banister, looking out over the rambunctious crowd of people dining together. Peter stands on his tip toes, hand grasping Tony's once more as he tries to pull himself up to look over the rail.

"Attenzione!" The dining hall immediately silences. A few dish clatters can be heard as every eye turns to the man leaning smugly against the balustrade of the overlook. Eager ears listening for what the man had to say.

Tony raises an arm dramatically as if he's absorbing the attention, chin in the air. "Sono tornato!"

And cheers erupt in response. Hoots and hollers interspersed with sharp whistles and joyous shouts. Tony eats it up. While the ruckus continues, he bends down to lift Peter onto his hip so everyone could see, then he turns and reaches towards Harley in a vague gesture for him to step up beside him. Harley obeyed and stood stiffly at Tony's side as he looked over the rows of tables below them.

A curt, sharp whistle escapes Tony's mouth to garner their attention once more and Harley just barely catches a glimpse of the man's lip between his teeth when he whips his head to look at him in surprise. The room silences and Harley can't help but feel quite impressed with Tony's ability to control the room.

"*Everyone, these are my boys,*" Tony speaks with a loud booming voice. "Harley and Peter."

Harley understands nothing more than when Tony spoke their names. He can already tell that this month is going to be a struggle for him with all the unnecessary touching from strangers and discussions he could barely understand.

"*I expect you to welcome them into this family as proper heirs to my title. Show the same honor and respect as you do me.*"

Tony trades his gaze between the two boys and smiles broadly, as does the crowd. "Well boys... Benvenuti nella Famiglia."

Cheer erupts once more, and Harley feels Tony pull him roughly into his side as they look out at the crowd like the dramatic nutcases they were. It felt eerily similar to the Lion King and Harley's suddenly hit with the realization that *yes, this is happening. This is real. He was technically the son to the leader of the most powerful mafia organization on the planet. And yes, these people were treating him and Peter like Princes*. Just like Tony had said.

Then, before he knows it, he's being swept off his feet by strong arms wrapping around his waist from behind and he yelps loudly in surprise. Then he's being lifted, *oh god, that's high*, and he flails just a bit before he's awkwardly perched on a stranger's broad shoulder.

He unconsciously reaches for Tony, but his captor is already marching away. Tony's laughing at him and he follows whoever this is that is carrying him, and Loki picks up the back.

"*The Starks have returned!*" The voice below him thunders exuberantly in Italian, much less melodic than he's heard thus far. The man descends the stairs, keeping a strong arm laid over Harley's lap to keep him steady, but that didn't quash his nerves. They move through the throng of people who have since sat down and were chattering happily while eating their meal. Several wave at him, and he shyly waves back, glancing at Tony behind him with uncertainty dancing behind his eyes. Tony only smiles back at him proudly, and Harley can't help but feel a little better. Then he spies Peter waving animatedly with several chirps of 'hi, I'm Peter,' as he greeted everyone they passed.

But then he's moving again, and he can't help but feel his heart plummet as the large man practically drops him to the ground. "Whoa," he chokes. Then just before the soles of his shoes can scrape the floor, arms tuck beneath his armpits and hold him up like he was a small child. That's when Harley gets a good look at the man, all smiles, big muscles, and blonde hair.

"It is so nice to finally meet you, young Stark." Then they're hugging... he doesn't know why, but he's being crushed against the large man in a strong hug and he can't breathe!

"Alright, brother, let the child go. There is no need to crush him."

And just like that, he's released and falling gracelessly into the seat beside the head of the table at a relatively unbusy end of the room.

"Thor," Tony smiles as he gently places Peter in the seat across from Harley. "How you been, pal?"

Tony barely has time to brace himself before the brick wall of a man is colliding into him and wrapping him in a massive hug big enough to lift him quite literally off his feet.

"Alright, big guy calm down," he chuckled, awkwardly patting the inhumanly large bicep of the man from where his arms had been pinned to his sides.

"You have been gone far too long, Stark."

"I know I have," Tony sighs as Thor slowly lowers him back to his feet. "Things have just been so busy back in the States." He moves towards the head of the table and rubs his hands together excitedly. "Now, I'm starved. What has Julio cooked up for us today?"

Thor eagerly moves around the table to take the seat next to Peter, and Loki sits down next to Harley.

"You're favorite of course, Stark," Loki smiles, "Chicken piccata, fresh scallops, smashed potatoes and homemade buttered noodles."

Just then a sharply dressed man, one could only assume to be a waiter, appeared with a large silver tray in his hand as he began slowly placing the meal in front of Tony one plate at a time. Tony smiled and licked his lips. He looked up at the waiter and smiled. "*Wait here a minute, please.*"

He turns to Peter, who had since stood in his chair to lean over the table and stare down at the dish

of foreign food on his father's plates. "Does any of this look yummy, Pete?"

Peter's nose wrinkles as he studies the various plates, then his tiny hand reaches for one of the buttered noodles and he shoves it in his mouth quickly.

"It good?" Tony questioned with an amused chuckle, watching Peter's face closely. The boy quickly nods his head and reaches for another noodle from Tony's bowl.

"Ah-ah-ah, I want you to try the chicken and potato first." He grabs a knife and slices off a quick chunk of each. Peter pouts, of course, but he allows Tony to push the seasoned foods perched on the fork past his lips anyways.

In the end, Peter's going back for the noodles, and Tony sighs in happy amusement. He takes the bowl of noodles and places it in front of Peter, pressing a fork into his hand so he'd stop eating with his fingers.

"*Who are you and what the hell have you done with Tony Stark?*" A new voice interrupted as Tony placed his own fork down beside his plate. His head snaps over to see the woman take the seat on Thor's other side, wearing a smug grin.

"*It's a new me, Valkyrie. Get used to it.*"

The woman rolls her eyes at him. She shoves a large forkful of noodles into her mouth and waves at Harley in a polite greeting. Harley waves back with a small smile.

Then Tony turns back to the server and smiles. A server had come and gone to deliver food for both Thor and Loki as well, but neither had touched their food while they watched Tony's interaction with Peter. Both apparently just as shocked as the woman was by Tony's new indifference towards sharing his food... fork too for that matter. Tony pointedly ignores them.

"*We'll need another bowl of the buttered noodles. And have someone whip up a couple of those chicken tenders I called ahead for would ya . And some chilled apple juice in a sippy cup, please. No glass for him and no ice.*"

"Si, signore."

Then Tony's turning to Harley.

"You wanna try a bite kid, see if you want any?"

"Well-well, I mean, I'm not all that picky--"

"Why don't you try the scallops to make sure you like it? Have you ever had one before?"

Harley shook his head as he looked down at the squishy lumps covered in all kinds of reds and greens.

"Alright, take a bite." He nudges his plate of scallops for Harley to pick from and turns back to the man patiently waiting for Tony's attention to return to him. "*How's the wine this season? Any from Domencio's?*"

"*We have a wide selection set aside just for you, sir. Selected by Mr. Ardino himself. Would you like me to bring out a few bottles for you to try?*"

"*That would be lovely thank you.*" Then he's turning back to Harley. "Made your mind up, kid?"

“Uh yeah, I think I want the--”

“Tell him, not me,” Tony gestures to the server standing beside the table, listening aptly to what he has to say.

“Uhh, but I don’t speak Italian.”

“Just tell him, kid. He won’t bite. At least not while I’m here.”

Harley can hear the distinct sound of Loki snorting behind him and his nose wrinkles in annoyance as he glances up at the server and tells him what he wants with over exaggerated gestures and words.

“Okay, um, the pollo? That’s chicken, right? Uhh. Yeah, looks um, eccellente. And uhh. Well...” he turns to look at Tony. “How do I say ‘everything’ in Italian?”

“Tutto, signore,” the server speaks before Tony can even open his smirking mouth. Harley looks at him.

“What?”

“The Italian word for everything is Tutto, signore. What would you like to drink for your meal?”

Harley blinks.

“You speak English?”

“Yes. What would you like to drink, signore? Your father called ahead for quite the variety to be stocked before your arrival. We have apple juice, grape juice, orange juice, cranberry juice, pine--”

“I’ll just have water. Thanks!” Harley interrupted, turning away abruptly to cradle his head in his hands with an embarrassed sigh.

The server leaves and the table erupts with howls of laughter. Thor bangs his fist on the table, jostling the dishes and startling Peter away from his noodles. Loki, chuckles, eyes alight with amusement, as well as Valkyrie and another lady, who had apparently magically appeared beside Loki, were laughing at him too. How humiliating.

He turns to face a hysterical Tony, a scowl eating at his features.

“Why’d you embarrass me like that?”

“I didn’t do anything, kid. That was all you.”

“You told me to tell him my order,” Harley hissed.

“Exactly. I didn’t tell you to let lose your Spanish skills on him.”

Harley scowls at him and sticks out his tongue before grabbing for the plate of chicken the man was eating and pulling it towards himself.

“Hey, I was eating that!” Tony protested, fork floating above the placemat his plate had recently been sitting on.

“Well now *I’m* eating it, *and* I’m telling Mom you embarrassed me in front of everyone.”

Tony snorts and moves on to his scallops. "It's my word against yours, kid."

"And mine!" Peter chirped; face stuffed with noodles as he pointed an accusing finger at Tony.
"You 'barassed Ha'ley."

"And me!" Thor shouts eagerly with a grin.

"Wow, I can sure feel the love."

"Mine as well," the new lady announced, raising her hand as she gracefully placed a piece of chicken in her mouth.

"Okay-okay, I get the picture. You prefer my kid over me-- really Cho? After all we've been through?"

The woman sitting beside Thor smiled and shrugged her shoulders, then she winked at Harley.
"Well he's much cuter than you, Stark."

Tony frowns. "I take offense."

A ripple of laughter follows the statement, and Harley smiles, ducking his head to shyly push a piece of chicken in his mouth. He doesn't miss Tony's wink directed at him either.

Dinner was followed by a very unorganized meet and greet. Basically, Tony led Peter and Harley around the dining hall to meet anyone and everyone who dared approach... which was practically everybody. Harley's absolutely certain he will never be able to remember all the names. And god, the kissing. He could do with a lot less kissing and a lot less hugging. He's had his fair share of touching for the foreseeable future... at least when it came to strangers. Peter loved it though. He ate up all the kisses and was eager to return them with his own, unlike Harley who had simply stood stock still as many pudgy and beefy men grasped him by the shoulders and kissed both his cheeks. It wasn't as weird when the woman did it, but it was still not something he'd seek out on a regular occasion. Peter, though, had happily been passed around from one person's arms to the next, hugging them and greeting them with a "*Ciao! Sono Peter!*" that Tony had taught him.

Tony had known everyone though, and he had been more than happy to see everyone once again.

"Alright, it's pretty late," Tony announced through a yawn as they stepped off the elevator into the hallway their bedrooms were located. "It's about time for bed, don't you think?"

Peter's head was on his shoulder. The boy was tucked out, sort of floating between a blissful haze of consciousness after the night of abundant affection and sleep. Tony passes the boy off to Harley gently. "Get him dressed for bed, would ya Buddy? I gotta go make sure your mother is doing alright. His overnight bag should be on his bed."

Harley nods. "Okay. Does he need a bath or something?"

Tony rubs his eyes and yawns once more, already moving down the hall. "No, he should be fine. Maybe just clean his face with a cloth, and make sure he brushes his teeth."

"Daddy" Peter protests with a loud whine, arm outstretched towards him when Harley starts moving in the other direction towards Peter's adjacent room.

"I'll come tuck you in in a few minutes, Squirt. Don't worry."

Sure enough, a few minutes later found Tony sitting on the edge of Peter's toddler bed as he tucked him in for the night after the boy had said goodnight to Pepper.

"How do you like it here so far, Bud?" Tony asked, arranging a couple of the stuffed animals next to Peter's head.

"I like it lots," Peter grins through a wide yawn. "I like my room too!" He gestures around at the array of toys scattered across his blue decorated room.

"Well, you can bring as much of this stuff as you want to the new house. We haven't had much time to get your room all gussied up like this one," Tony brushed hair out of Peter's face and smiled. "But I'll be taking you and your brother out at some point to pick out some decorations for your rooms. You can make it however you want."

"I'm gonna make it just like this! It's like a castle! An-and I want some dragons." Peter declared.

"Alright, that sounds good, Bug." Tony chuckled. Then he stood slowly from the bed and reached over to flick off the lamp. "Sleep tight."

Tony was awoken from his sleep at the familiar patter of feet entering his room. He chuffed softly and rolled away from where his chest was pressed up against Pepper's back. He stretched and glanced at the time on his bedside clock then rubbed his eyes. Two o'clock. Seems like the kid lasted longer than expected. He guessed 10; Pepper guessed 12.

"Hey, kiddo," he groaned softly, blinking lethargically as he groped around for the lamplight to turn on so he could actually see the kid.

The light flickered on and he squinted at the harsh shine.

"Hey, Tony," Harley whispered shyly in response, and Tony forced his eyes open to see the teen carrying Peter in his arms. "Uhh, Pete um... Pete's upset."

Tony sits up on his elbows and gestures for him to move closer. "Is he okay? Did he have a nightmare?"

"I don't know. He hasn't woke up yet."

Tony furrowed his brows and reached an arm out for Harley to give him Peter. The teen obliged and Tony gathered the lump of heat and gangly limbs into his arms. The kid seemed alright. No tear tracks and no traces of a night terror.

"He seems alright to me," Tony muses softly, combing through Peter's hair as he settles the boy to comfortably lie beside him. Harley shuffles awkwardly beside the bed and scratches his head nervously.

"Yeah, well, um... I-I heard him crying a bit in his sleep an-and I thought he might be getting another nightmare. I-I didn't want it to get worse and make him all scared, y'know. So-so I thought if I, like, brought him straight here to you guys, he'd be okay again."

Tony watched Harley's face screw in worry and the way he wrung his hands nervously in front of him as he stared down at Peter, and for a moment Tony felt that maybe the whole thing with Richard had hit the kid harder than he thought.

"Kid, look at me." Harley did as he was told, eyes wide and bloodshot.

“Hey,” Tony spoke softly, beckoning the kid closer and grabbing his wrist, “how’d you hear him crying from your room all the way down the hall?”

“I-I-I just have real good hearing,” Harley stuttered.

“Bullshit...” Tony accused with a sad smile. “Y’know I gave you two separate rooms because I thought you might appreciate the space.”

“I-I *do* , Tony. I-I really appreciate you and Pepper giving me my own room...”

“Then why were you in Pete’s room instead of sleeping like you should be doing at 2 in the morning? Does this happen to have anything to do with what Richard told you?”

Harley drew in a sharp breath and turned his head away from Tony to stare at the wall across the room. His mouth opened then twitched before his breath hiccupped. “I-I,” he choked with a quiet keen, “I just... I-I didn’t know. If I had known... If-if-if I’d known I woulda tried harder.” Harley dropped his head and muffled a sob in his chest before taking another sharp gasp of air. He makes a move to flee the room, but Tony’s grip on his wrist tugs him closer to the bed.

“Hey, look at me,” Tony instructs sharply.

Harley shakes his downturned head and speaks again. “I-I just don’t want him to be alone.”

“He’s not alone Harls. He was just sleeping. You don’t have to worry about him. He’s safe here. This is the safest place for him,” he squeezes the boy’s hand and sighs, “and you’re safe here too. You do know that, right?”

Harley’s response was a forced nod and Tony had a feeling the kid wasn’t too keen to share his true feelings on the matter.

“Thank you for bringing him to us though. You’re a really great big brother.”

Harley doesn’t say a word, and he doesn’t look up at Tony either.

“I think maybe you should try and get some sleep,” Tony sighed eventually when it was clear Harley wasn’t planning to continue their conversation. “Do you want me to come, like, um... tuck you in or something?”

Harley shakes his head quickly and he swallows visibly, but he doesn’t make a move to leave the room.

And then he’s shuffling on his feet again and tugging at the hem of his pajama shirt before he looks up at Tony with red tinted cheeks. “Would it--um... would it be, like, awkward or something if I slept here tonight?”

Tony freezes for a split second before his head kicks back into gear and he starts shuffling away from the edge of the bed. “Of course it’ll be awkward, but that hasn’t stopped us before. Hop in, kid.”

Harley’s eyes widened and if it were possible his cheeks seemed to redden even further. “O-oh... I just-- I mean, um. I could just sleep on the floor.”

Tony was not impressed.

“You are not sleeping on the floor. Now, you can go cuddle up on Pepper’s side if you’re more

comfortable with that or you can sleep next to me and Pete. This King bed is more than enough for the four of us.”

Harley’s eyes flickered between Tony and the blanket covered form of Pepper. He grinds his teeth in nervous contemplation, unsure of who to go to, or if he should go to either of them at all. Tony must pick up on his indecision and he slowly starts shuffling back towards the edge of the bed.

“Why don’t you take the middle, kid? That way you don’t have to choose.”

Harley’s shuffling picks up a bit, but then he’s nodding stiffly and moving towards the bed. He makes a point to avoid eye contact with Tony as he carefully climbs over his legs to slip his way into the middle of the bed. Tony pulls back the covers for him so he could slip beneath them.

The instant he settles into the comfy bed he’s encompassed with a wave of warmth and security, and he’s pretty sure he melts into the mattress.

“You comfy?” Tony chuckles beside him as he gently situates Peter on his other side.

“Y-yeah,” Harley whispers before a single choked chuckle escapes him. “Yeah, it’s kinda nice... I-I see why Peter likes it so much.” He closes his eyes slowly and basks in the warmth. A loose feeling of relief flows through him and his tight muscles loosen with each intake of breath, as if his body is finally allowing him to relax in the comfort and security of his parents. In their bed... because that’s what kids do... they go to their parents after they have nightmares or when they’re upset. And the parents hug them and protect them until the kids aren’t scared anymore... this is what it’s like.

Warm tears prick at his eyes and his chest tightens with pent up emotion.

Tony shifts beside him as the man slowly rolls onto his side so he’s facing Harley. Then his large, calloused hand lifts to his face and a warm thumb strokes right beneath his eye as it wipes away a tear and Harley turns his face into the touch in an unspoken request for more.

Rough knuckles skirt softly across his cheekbones and he swears he can hear a quiet hum coming from Tony’s chest and he moves in closer. The hand settles, cupping his jaw. Fingers brush through the hair behind his ear as the same thumb strokes beneath his eye in soft, rhythmic movements. Then his head is being pulled forward and he feels the man press a loving kiss to his hairline.

“You’re safe. I will always keep you safe; remember that if nothing else,” he whispers quietly, thumb never ceasing in the comforting strokes. “You can sleep now. You got Mom and Dad manning both sides, bambino. We won’t let anything happen to you or your brother. Now go to sleep. We’ve got another big day tomorrow.”

Harley draws in a sharp gasp, and his chin quivers, but he nods his head anyway.

He’s okay. Everything’s okay. It’s *really* okay. Or at least he thought he was until he felt Tony start pulling away.

He doesn’t mean to, but he does... he lurches forward and hugs him tight; nose nuzzling into the crevice of his neck as his tight sobs escape him. “I love you,” he rasps through his tears as he scrabbles to keep a firm hold on the man. “I love you,” he repeats. He couldn’t care less about how awkward and embarrassed he was going to feel in the morning... it just felt right.

And then Tony’s hugging him too, pulling him in close. “I love you too, kiddo.” Then he kisses the crown of his head. Once, Twice, three times and *okay* maybe he’s not as adverse to kisses as he

thought he was. “I know neither of us are the best at wearing our hearts on our sleeves,” Tony mutters, “but never doubt how much I love you, kid, because I do. I do. A helluva lot more than I should love a kid I only met a few months ago.”

“Ditto,” Harley rasps softly and Tony chuckles as he gives the kid one last squeeze. They pull away and Tony rolls back onto his back, gently pulling Peter back into his side once more.

And, okay, yeah, Harley’s going to totally hate himself in the morning, but he sidles up into Tony’s other side, tentatively moving to cuddle into him. He allows himself to enjoy the moment when Tony’s arm wraps around his shoulder and pulls him close again.

Then he falls asleep, and it’s quite possibly the best sleep he’s had in his life.

“Rhodes here,” Rhodey answers as he pokes at his dinner with his fork. “What’s wrong now, Steve?”

“Rhodes!” Steve whispered harshly; breath heavy. “They’ve found me out. I-I need--”

Rhodey stands abruptly from his chair and makes a gesture with his hand and several of the other men seated at the table stand as well. “We’re going to come help out. Where are you?”

“I’m still at the precinct. I’m in a storage closet now. I heard them asking around for me while I was in the file room. They *know*. The FBI and Homeland are on their way.”

“Alright here’s what you’re gonna do. First, you need to hightail it on outta there. Do you have the names Tony wanted?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, get out. Meet us in the alley off 5th street. Got it? We’ll bring you back to the Tower.”

“Okay, just be quick about it. I don’t think they’d let me out on bail if I get caught.”

“Just hang tight, Spangles.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed! Lemme know you're thoughts. Sorry if it felt a bit rushed at times. There was just so much to include and I didn't want to draw it out any longer than it had to be. Plus I wanted to get it up tonight, so yeah. Thanks for reading!

Love you! XOXOXO

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Alright guys...

Here's the fluff I've been promising ;)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony is awoken by a series of persistent vibrations wrapping around his right wrist. He stirs and grumbles in irritation as he tries to move, but finds he's weighed down by bodies on either side of him. He cranes his head, blinking his eyes in a sluggish attempt to clear the blariness and he just so happens to catch a glimpse of the two wild mops of hair; they both need haircuts. Peter's practically on top of him, just as he usually is. One leg hiked up around Tony's waist and an open hand was splayed against the side of his neck.

Harley, though, seems to have some semblance of personal space. The kid was curled in on himself, facing Pepper, and has kept his hands to himself. The only form of contact was his back lightly brushing against Tony's side and his Tony's right arm tucked under the pillow beneath the kid's head... which was the exact arm he needed free to cease the buzzing on his wrist.

The vibrating doesn't stop and Tony groans in frustration as he does his best to quell his irritation and maneuver himself out from under the two kids without waking them up. Once he's sitting on the side of the mattress, he sorta rolls Peter away from the edge so he wouldn't end up falling off while he was asleep and hurting himself.

Tony yawns then twists his wrist around to glance at the screen of his watch.

Rhodey was calling... Then he frowns and glances around the room in search of his phone, wondering why the man insisted on a holo-call instead of a regular one through his cell.

His body slouches in exasperation when he realizes he must have left the device somewhere else and he groans, finally succumbing to his exasperation as his head lolls forward and he bends at the waist to press his forehead to his knees. Was Rhodey really incapable of running things without his help for less than a full day? This was supposed to be a vacation, which meant not having to be bothered with work.

He grumbles under his breath and leaves the room. As he walks down the hall, he lifts his wrist and rubs at his eyes with his other hand as he answers Rhodey's call.

"You better have a damn good reason for waking me up from my comfy as all hell cuddle pile at 4 in the morning," Tony grumbles, glancing at the blue holographic display of Rhodey's face. He was sad to say that it looked to be one of Rhodey's more serious faces. *Shit must have just gone down.*

"We've got a situation Tony." Rhodey answered. Then the image is expanding to reveal another man by the name of Steve Rogers. *Aw hell... why was he always right?*

"Hey Stark," the man greeted, looking stony and very much unamused.

Tony paused in his trek and allowed his confusion to do a full circle before asking his loaded question. “What’s going on?”

He eventually reaches one of the many lounge rooms scattered through the upper floors of HQ and he immediately transfers the holo-call from his watch to video on the widescreen TV in the room. He stands within view, hands on his hips, and a frown on his face.

“This evening I snuck into the precinct to find information on the two snipers and their arrangements for protective custody. I found a hard copy of their file since all case files regarding you aren’t allowed on the online database. I was gonna go make copies so they wouldn’t realize anything was missing. I was on my way to get to the copier room and I heard talk in the bullpen of Reilly asking for me. Apparently, the FBI showed up again for my evaluation--”

“And,” Tony interrupted impatiently, gesturing for Steve to hurry his story along and skip over the boring details. “I don’t need every detail Rogers, just tell me what happened.”

Steve’s face fell into an unamused frown as he continued with a slight bite to his tone.

“Basically, someone told Reilly they found video surveillance of me in the file room. One thing led to another and now they’ve got all they need to tie me to your case and label me as an accessory to you and arrest me for treason.”

“But you got the file?”

“Yes, Tony, I got the file,” he held up a manilla folder beside his head to prove his statement, looking irritated with Tony’s careless dismissal of his career-ending predicament.

Tony felt a small tingle run down the length of his arms. A trill of either anticipation or fear crawled up his spine as he glanced behind him to double check he was alone in the room. “Where are they?”

“They’re at a safe house at the North border of Jersey. I don’t know for how long though. Now that Reilly knows you have access to their location through me, he’ll be transferring them as soon as possible.”

“Okay,” Tony nods stiffly. His nose twitches with a quiet sniff and he looks away from the screen to contemplate his next course of action. This was big. These guys were meant to testify against him, *and* they have information on whichever bastard must have hired them to take a hit at his kid. “Okay... I’ll get the jet ready to leave this morning. I’ll leave Pepper and the kids here at HQ the couple days I’m gone. I want you to get down there and bring ‘em to one of my cottages upstate. I’ll take care of them there--”

“Tony you can’t.” Rhodey instructs with a firm shake of his head. “You’re on vacation for a reason. We’ve got this.”

“Rhodes, this isn’t your decision! This is my top priority. This is more important than anything else I’ve got going on right now. The vacation can wait.”

“More important than your family, huh?” Rhodey retaliates, raising a brow and fixing Tony with one of those dumb looks he hates so much.

“Don’t twist my words,” Tony growls under his breath. “This is important. These men know something. If they’re not connected directly to Hydra they must be connected down the line because very few people have the balls to so openly attack me and my family like that. It’s personal now. *They’ve made it personal.*”

“Tony it’s not worth it, believe me. Just stay in Italy with Pepper and the kids. I’ll take care of this. With Reilly and the Feds on high alert it won’t be such a good idea to come back right now anyway. And you know Pepper would wring your balls if you got arrested when y’all were supposed to be having happy family time in your hometown.”

Tony didn’t like it. He didn’t like it one bit. He hated it when Rhodey made good points because, well, those good points tended to change his mind on important things.

“Maybe you can just hold ‘em. Hold them until I get back so I can talk to them myself.”

Rhodey pauses for a moment then shakes his head. “Tony, that’s not gonna work, you know that. If there really is somebody out there trying to kill Harley and it *isn’t* Oscorp - which I don’t think it is - I think we need to know about it before you guys come back rather than after. It’s safest this way.”

Steve remains uncannily silent as he quietly observes their argument.

Tony scowls and lifts his hand to comb fingers through his knotted hair. He relents and makes a final decision, deciding not to fall for Rhodey’s guilt-trip. “I’m just gonna come back tonight. I won’t be gone long; the boys won’t even miss me they’ll be having so much fun.”

“Tony that’s really not--”

“Daddy?” A tiny voice pipes up from across the hall.

Tony swivels on his heel to see Peter barreling towards him with a bright grin split across his face, still decked out in the giraffe pajamas Tony dressed him in last night.

“I found you!” Peter shouts with a celebratory squeal as he leaps at Tony, knowing the man would catch him.

“That you did, Pete,” Tony chuckles, hoisting the boy up further in his arms so they were face to face, Peter’s legs hugging his waist.

Peter doesn’t pay any attention to the two men on the screen, focusing solely on Tony as he lifts his hands to Tony’s face to squish the man’s cheeks together between his palms and scratch his fingers along his prickly facial hair as he babbles.

“Can we have panca’es for b’eakfast! I wan’ panca’es. Bu’ not now! Cuz I not hung’y yet. Oh oh an’ bacon too! Can we get bacon? Ha’ley says it’s a pig’s butt!” The boy giggles at his own words.

“Yeah Pete,” Tony sighs with a roll of his eyes, “we can have pancakes and pig butt for breakfast.”

Peter laughs harder, then his face suddenly turns stern as he lectures Tony on the specific details needed for his breakfast. “But only the way Mama makes it though! The-the-the ones with a chocolate smile an’ eyes an’-an’ mickey ears! And then bacon as whiskers!”

“Oh, Mickey mouse ears and bacon whiskers are a must, huh?” Tony smiles.

“Yeah,” Peter nods sagely with a sigh as if he were truly exasperated with the unneeded complexity of life.

“Well, I’ll make sure to pass on your instructions to the chef. Now why don’t you say hi to Uncle Rhodey and Captain Spangles?” Tony gestures with his head to the TV screen and Peter swivels around in his arms.

“Oh! Hi Uncle Rhodey!” He waves his hand with much more energy than a child should have so early in the morning and Rhodey waves back. Then his gaze casts over to the unfamiliar man standing beside Rhodey and he frowns for just a moment as he tries to recall him. “And um... Hi, uhh, C’ptain Sprinkles!”

Tony throws his head back and laughs and Rhodey tries and fails to hide a small chuckle behind his hand. Steve didn’t seem too amused, but Peter was beaming brightly at making his father and uncle laugh and he cluelessly laughed along with them.

“Well, Captain Sprinkles. Looks like you’ve just earned yourself a new codename. Good job Pete,” Tony kisses the side of the boy’s head and Peter happily returns the gesture by throwing his arms around the man’s neck and nuzzling into his cheek.

“Now, it’s kinda early. Why don’t you try and sleep a bit more--”

Rhodey of course takes the opportunity and pounces before Tony can send the child back to bed.

“Watcha gonna do today Pete?” Rhodey interrupts with a smile. Tony throws the man a scathing look and Peter happily jumps into his excited rendition of the day’s plans Tony had listed off to him last night before bed.

“We’re gonna see the new house today! I got my own room and Daddy say I can make it look how whatever I want it to be! An’-an’ he says we gotta big *huge* yard with-with-with tons of trees and grass! And it’s green all over too with flowers an’-an’ maybe some cool bugs. An’ he said we can maybe even go near the lake and look at fishies in the water! Then-then there’s a *pool* too. An’-an’ we’re gonna have *sooo* much fun t’day. I so e’cited!”

“Is that right?” Rhodey muses with a dramatic gasp. A soft smile spreads across his lips as he listens to Peter’s list of fun things he was looking forward to, most of which seemed so menial and insignificant to anyone that wasn’t a four-year-old and hadn’t been cooped up inside a building in New York his entire life.

“Yeah!” Peter grins, head bobbing up and down so quickly he could be mistaken for a bobble-head. An’-an’ guess what?” He whispered, leaning closer to the screen and cupping his hand around his mouth as if he were about to tell a dramatic secret.

“What?” Rhodey indulged with a matching conspiratorial whisper.

“Daddy say we can even see stars here. In the sky. So many of ‘em too. Like-like he say that they’re like as many stars as there are lights at home. That’s *so* many.” Peter nods seriously, eyes bugging out as if he couldn’t quite believe it himself. “An’ planets. *Planets* Unc’e Rhodey. I might get ta see a planet tonight. Isn’t that crazy?!” His face scrunches up in imitation of an adults exaggerated befuddlement of something so sensational or surreal, and his hands lift to throw in the air just to add to the theatrics.

“Wow,” Rhodey whistles, turning his head to Steve as if to share a look of amazement with him. “That’s so crazy Peter. I’m so jealous.”

“Yeah. It’s gonna be so cool. Right Daddy?” Then Peter’s gaze is turning to look back at Tony and Tony can’t help but smile.

He hadn’t ever seen Peter as excited for something like this before... and it warmed his heart thinking his kid got excited at such a trivial thing like looking at the stars and playing in the grass. It reminded him of why he enjoyed this country so much as a kid... because he was actually

allowed to be a kid... when his father wasn't around to spoil his fun at least.

"Well, it sounds like you guys got lots to prepare for today..." And Tony knows it's a jab at him to guilt him into staying even though Rhodey was still looking at Peter. And Tony's gotta admit... Rhodey knows how to handle him, because after seeing Peter so wonderstruck he's going to have a hard time leaving and missing out on seeing the look on Peter's face when the kid sees his first real night sky. "And Tony... I just want you to know that I've got this, alright? I promise everything will be taken care of just how you'd want and I'll record every second of it for you."

Tony doesn't respond. How was he supposed to respond after being played so easily? It was sad, really. Rhodey knows his weakness and he doesn't hesitate to use it against him... *damn that man*. So, he adjusts Peter in his arms, so he's propped up against his hip then ignores Rhodey's statement then turns to Steve.

"Get in contact with Sergeant Barnes. If you've been compromised it won't be long before he is too. If Ross finds him out, he'll be in much more trouble than you Rogers. For the time being you're welcome to stay in the Tower and so is Barnes if he needs a place to hide out."

"Thank you, Stark," Steve responds.

"No problem... *Captain Sprinkles*," Tony teases with a husky chuckle. Steve scowls at him and Tony laughs again. "And Rhodes... keep this on the down low. I don't need everybody and their mother knowing about what's goin' on with these goons, especially if they've got an in with Reilly."

"I won't Tony. I'll take care of it."

The three men offer stiff nods as they're customary farewell, but Peter waves sporadically. "Bye-bye!"

"Bye Pete. Have fun," Rhodey finishes with a smile before signing off.

Tony sighs low and deep as he slowly turns away from the blank TV screen with Peter still in his arms. "What's got you up so early Stinker?"

Peter giggles and lays his head on Tony's shoulder. "I just woked up and wasn't tired no more."

"Ah, I see," Tony nods. He pauses in the hall, contemplating whether he should head back to bed and force Peter to lay down and try to sleep a couple more hours... or maybe he could just drop the boy off in his room amongst all his toys and let him have at it while he went back to bed.

"Can we do somethin' fun?" Peter asks, tugging on the collar of Tony's night shirt. "Just us while Ha'ley and Mommy are sleepin' still?"

Well there goes that idea.

Why does he have to be such a pushover? His father would have had no problem saying no to such a request like that... although, he would have known better than to ask for anything of the sort. Heck, he'd never *want* to do anything with the man. So, he supposes his inability to say no to his kid's wanting to spend time together was a good sign he wasn't turning out like his abusive sperm donor.

His kid *wanted* to spend time with him. '*Just us*'.

"Sure, Bub, what do you wanna do?" He puts a hand over his mouth to cover a wide yawn and he

glances out one of the windows to see the sun hadn't even bothered to rise yet.

"I dunno," Peter quips, twisting in Tony's arms to glance around the dark home for an idea of something to do. "Can we go outside now?"

"The sun hasn't even woken up yet, kiddo. It's still dark outside. Why don't we read one of your books or play with one of your new toys?"

"Well when does the sun wake up?"

Tony glances down at his watch and squints at the display. "Should be soon probably..." Then an idea hits him and he turns his head to look at Peter's face. "How about we watch the sun come up, huh. It'll be really pretty."

"Yeah!"

So, that's how Tony found himself reclined in a lounge chair on the third-floor balcony. Pete sat in his lap, back pressed to his chest as they both looked out towards the horizon lingering over the city skyline. Wisps of oranges and pinks littered the sky and blended into the dark blues and purples settled above where a few specks of stars could be spotted through the morning hue. Peter had yet to say a word as he stared out at the pretty colors, fists hanging tightly to the fingers of Tony's hand braced against his small chest. It was peaceful and quiet. No hustle and bustle like there would be in New York... it was home, and the wave of relief and pleasure that wafted over Tony only further solidified his unsure decision to stay.

"Daddy?" Peter whispered into the quiet, chilled air of the early morning, gaze never deterring from the view as his eyes glistened with childish wonderment. "What makes the sky so pretty?"

Tony pauses a bit. Not in thought, because obviously he can understand and explain the concept of Scattering, but more so in appreciation for the child's undying curiosity. He lifts his free hand to gently comb through the boy's hair, clearing the mess of curls from his forehead as his fingers gently work their way through the knots with care. Then Peter's head falls back with a thump as he settles it just beneath his father's chin. "Well," he muses softly, searching for the proper way to explain such an intricate idea to a four-year-old toddler. "Different colors are made in the sky because some light waves from the sun have to travel farther to meet our eyes than others."

Peter twists his head to stare up at his father with a cute furrow between his brows. Then he asks the forever dreaded question of "why?"

So, Tony tells him. He tells him about light waves, wave lengths, the Earth's rotation, and its orbit around the sun. How and why there is day and night and how the sky changes its color when the sun shines on the atmosphere at certain angles. He thinks Peter might actually be catching on, but then--

"Look!" Peter shouts, sitting up. That way he's no longer reclined against his father's chest so he could better see the sun creeping above the rooftops. "There it is! You see it Daddy? You see it?!"

Tony chuckles, low and deep within his chest as he braces one hand against the boy's waist, so he doesn't topple off his lap in his excitement. "I sure do, Bug. It's pretty isn't it?"

"So pretty," Peter breathed with child-like astonishment. Then he huffed dramatically and threw his arms in the air as he fell back against Tony's chest with a satisfied sigh as if all goals in life had finally been accomplished after the one encounter. "So, so pretty."

The comfortable silence returns as father and son watch the sun slowly rise further into the sky.

And then Peter had another question.

“Daddy?” Tony hummed in acknowledgement and Peter continued. “What’s the other language word for pretty?”

“Bella,” Tony answered softly, hand gently rubbing down Peter’s chest and stomach in slow, comforting strokes.

“Hmm,” Peter hummed, arms wrapping around his own waist to hug Tony’s hand and arm closer to him, “the sun is so bella.”

Tony chuckles, dropping his head just a bit to kiss the top of his son’s crown. “Try saying ‘*il sole è bella*’.” He says each word slowly so Peter can hear each sound. “That means the sun is beautiful.”

Peter repeats the words slowly and carefully, still just a bit distracted by the bright colors painting the sky. Tony helps him sound out the words and soon the boy’s repeating it, over and over and over again.

Soon the sun has risen enough for Peter to lose interest and he’s pressing Tony with more questions that only a toddler could think to ask. *Why don’t stars make the sky pretty too? Why doesn’t the moon shine like the sun? Why is it sometimes there and sometimes not? Is the moon really made of cheese? How do planets float? Is the Earth heavy? Are aliens real?* And the questions just don’t seem to be stopping anytime soon. Tony feels like he may have sparked a bit of an obsession in the boy... but he answered each question as simply as he could, but some concepts were just too difficult for Peter to grasp, which led to a strenuous succession of ‘why’s?’ and ‘how’s?’, which only leads to further questions and more confusion.

Once they’ve hit the question of “how big is space?” Tony gives up. That one question would only certainly lead to an entire new slew of questions... and he needed some coffee before he even tried to muster the patience.

“How about we talk about this when Dad’s more awake, huh?” He sighs, tightening his arm around Peter’s waist as he slowly stands from the chaise lounge chair. He groans when his back twinges in discomfort. “Let’s head in and see if Mama’s awake. She might want some breakfast.”

“Yeah!” Peter agrees with a bright grin. So, Tony sets the boy on his feet and the child sprints back the way they came.

“You got all our bags?” Tony asks Clint as he hands the man Peter’s duffel bag to stuff in their trunk.

“Yes, and the rest should be in the Towncar we’ll be following you up in.” Clint affirms, stuffing the last bag in and closing the trunk.

Tony nods and turns to try and usher his family into the car. Thor was regaling Peter with a story as he marched up and down the stairs with the boy perched on his shoulders. The two had bonded quickly that morning when Thor and Loki joined them for breakfast. And Thor had even kept the kid entertained with his toys while Tony went around and assisted Loki with a few quick management-type things that needed to be taken care of before he left. Pepper insisted that they needed at least one full week of no work so they could relax and bond and do whatever other dumb shit people did when they were on vacation.

Harley stood near the door, back erect as he stood beside Loki, doing his best to appear stoic and unimpressed to mimic the man beside him. And, boy, the child looked so small standing beside

that Tower of a man that Tony nearly laughed.

“Alright, boy’s, hop in the car. Harley, help Pete into his car seat while I go get your mother.”

With that he bounded up the steps and passed through the wide doors, more than ready to head out and get settled in their new home. At the other end of the foyer he sees Pepper walking alongside Cho with her bag over her shoulder and an easy smile on her face.

“You ready, Pep?” Tony asks as he quickly approaches to loop his arm through hers as added support.

“Of course.” She answers, chasing his face to grace him with a chaste kiss.

Tony smiles at her then turns to the woman walking beside them. “We have a small cottage set up for you near our house, Dr. I’d like you there some time tonight in case there is an emergency.”

Helen smirks at him and rolls her eyes. “I suppose I’ll indulge your paranoia, Stark.”

Tony frowned at her, unamused. “It’s not paranoia, Cho. It’s called precaution. I’d rather not have my only trusted doctor thirty minutes away if there happens to be an emergency.”

“Ok, stop bickering,” Pepper interrupted, swatting Tony’s chest with the back of her hand. “I’ll be fine. Now, I was just talking to Cho about the fake DNA tests and blood work on the boys and she has it all done and ready to go. So, I’m having Natasha stay back to fax the papers to Happy so he can get it to our lawyers. They need to make sure everything is in order well before your court date. So, Cho will bring her up to the house with her when she comes up.”

Tony shoots her a weird look. “Faxing? What is this, the 1500s? Why can’t she use email like a normal human?”

Pepper rolls her eyes at him and pushes away from his hold to walk forward on her own. She slowly descends the steps, taking Thor’s offered hand as she descended the bottom two, and the man helps her into the passenger side of the car.

“Don’t question a pregnant woman, Stark. I thought you would have learned that by now,” Cho chuckled. “She and the baby are doing fine by the way. Keep her off her feet the best you can for the next couple days though. She’s tired and she’s too stubborn to admit that yesterday’s travelling wore her out.” Tony nods, listening intently to the woman’s instructions, then the good doctor turns on her heel to head back inside. “I’ll see you tonight, Stark. Call if you need anything else.”

Tony drove the car twenty minutes into the countryside, following behind the Towncar Asher Clint, and one of Cho’s trusted nurses were riding in. The boys oohed and ahed at the scenery as they passed. They had probably never seen so many trees in their entire lives which was just sad and did nothing more but spur Tony’s determination to make this the most memorable trip ever.

“Alright, we’re here!” Pepper cheers as they start their way up a long gravelly driveway. They passed what looked to be a couple small residential buildings along the way and a barn of sorts way in the distance near a wide-open field.

“Oh wow!” Peter shouts as he strains to look out the window. “It’s so bella!”

Tony throws his head back with an exuberant laugh and Pepper turns around to look at Peter with a confused, yet amused quirk to her brow. Harley gave him a weird look too.

“What was that, baby?” Pepper questioned softly.

“È così bello, Peter,” Tony corrects softly with a small grin on his face as he glances back at the child through the rearview mirror before Peter has a chance to repeat his words.

“È così bello,” Peter repeats slowly, with just a bit of a slur and a confused scrunch to his face.

Pepper beams and is quick to praise him. “That’s right Peter. It is very beautiful.”

Soon they were pulling to a stop in front of a beautiful home decorated in stone and large wooden beams. Tony could feel the excitement from the children in the backseat as the two Munchkins chattered eagerly at the sight of their new home. And he should have expected it, but it seemed almost like as soon as the car was put in park the back doors were being swung open as Harley dragged Peter out of the car to approach the house. They didn’t go in... instead they ran around the side, already off to explore the enormous amount of land Tony had insisted on for not only their privacy, but for a bit of a change as well.

Tony chuckled under his breath and stepped out of the car. He caught Clint’s eye and nodded his head in the direction the kids had taken off. “Keep an eye on them Barton. Make sure they don’t wander too far.”

Clint obeyed and turned to follow after the boys. Then Tony stepped forward and held open the back door for the nurse Cho had sent ahead of them, he held out his hand and helped the petite woman out of the car. She looked to be barely in her twenties.

“Good morning, Ma’am. I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name before.”

The woman’s face flushed, and she bowed her head in proper respect as she took Tony’s hand and exited the car.

“Elena, signore.” She whispered, avoiding his eyes.

Tony smiled at her shyness and lifted her hand to gently kiss the back of it in a polite greeting. Then he clapped his other hand atop hers and gently squeezed. *“It is very nice to meet you Elena. Would you please help my wife get settled in the Master bedroom? Thank you. I appreciate it.”*

He caught sight of her blush and he let go of her hand, smiling smugly to himself. She then rushed to the passenger side of his car and began helping Pepper out of the seat despite his wife’s insistence that she was capable of doing most of it herself.

He waited for both women to enter the house before turning to Asher who was busy unpacking their luggage from the trunk. “McAlister,” he snapped with an authoritative firmness, “A word?”

The man paused and stood erect, facing Tony with his hands at his sides. “Sir?” Tony stepped closer and looked up at the man who stood a foot taller than him.

“You’re a good soldier. I understand why Hogan sent you with us... but I want to make one thing clear.” His eyes narrowed threateningly. “You and Harley have had trouble in the past, and I’d just like you to know that if I so much as catch wind of another incident I will most definitely be playing favorites. Is that understood?”

Asher nods, lips pursed together tightly. “Yes sir. I had no intention to harm or offend Harley in the past, and I do not intend to do so again.”

Tony smiled, bright and friendly, a complete turnaround from his earlier demeanor. “Good man. Now why don’t you take those to the appropriate rooms and begin unpacking for the boys. Then you can take Clint and get settled in your new quarters.” He points to a smaller residential building

several yards down near the orchard. One they had passed on the drive up to the house.

“Yes sir.”

After dinner Cho shows up with Natasha. Natasha heads out to the barrack suites down the drive while Cho helps Pepper to her room to administer another check up on her and the baby and to make sure she settled in okay. So, Tony took the boys back outside like Peter had been begging him to do all through dinner.

They had had fun earlier. Tony had taken Clint’s place early in the afternoon after he knew Pepper was settled and things around the house were taken care of. He had taken the boys down to the lake where Peter had gotten a bit too intrigued with the squelchy sound the mud had made beneath his stomping feet... *and there had gone his brand new pair of sneakers*. They toured the grounds together, getting acquainted with the layout of the land and the long trails through the forest behind the house. It had been nice... and apparently neither boy was finished with their day of exploration.

So, they revisited the woodlands, and then the orchards, and the closer it came to sundown, the more hyper Peter seemed to become. Tony began to suggest calling it a night and start on baths and showers in hopes the child would mellow and conk out after the long day, but that did nothing more than set Peter off in a panic.

“Noo!” Peter screamed, lunging at Tony’s arm and tugging angrily. “No!”

“Peter,” Tony scolded gently, “what’s the matter?”

“I don’t wanna go inside.”

Tony sighed. He could already tell that bedtime tonight was going to be a chore even despite how exhausted he’s sure the child is after waking up so goddamned early. He knelt to the ground and grabbed Peter’s shoulders so the boy couldn’t attempt an escape. “Well, you’re gonna have to go inside at some point. Look at you. You’re coated in nature. We gotta wash that all off.”

He heard Harley chuckle from behind him then quickly wrapped his arms around Peter and stood with him when the kid tried pulling away. It ended with Peter giggling maniacally as Tony threw him over his shoulder and walked back to the house with Peter swinging upside down behind him.

The trio entered the home and Tony immediately called out for the nurse, who practically appeared out of thin air at her summoning. “*Ready a bath for Peter please. Bubbles and Toys. And set out a pair of pajamas on his bed too if you will.*”

“What’d you tell her?” Harley questioned as he watched the petite woman scurry down the hall. He was still clueless to the language despite Tony’s meager attempts to teach them words here and there throughout their time outside and even through dinner, like fish, tree, grass, bread, or bird. It wasn’t a very extensive lesson and Harley’s mind was already spinning with all the new words being thrown around.

“I just asked her to get Peter’s bath ready. I still gotta show you where your room is and I wanna see the look on your face when you see it.”

Yeah... the kids had barely come inside for food, let alone to see their rooms. Both were far more fascinated by the world outside, which Tony supposed was more than okay.

Harley’s eyes widen comically and jumps right into step behind Tony as the man manhandles Peter back into a normal hold, and soon they’re approaching a spiral staircase at the far corner of the

house. Harley's brows wrinkle in confusion and Tony can only smirk as he gestures for him to follow as he slowly ascends the staircase, ducking his head as he reaches the last couple steps.

The room is old and rustic, and it needs a bit of work, but it's cool. The ceiling slopes up into a point as most attics do and the bed is tucked into the right wall adjacent to the front window overlooking the orchard. A couple pillars line the middle of the room and the wooden beams cross over them, giving way into a small loft area opposite the window. The area is huge. Harley's mouth drops when he sees it and Tony beams.

"You like it?"

Harley doesn't really say anything right off, and then Peter's wiggling in his arms, begging to be put down. Tony obliges and the kid immediately rushes to the window to gaze outside, little hands pressed to the glass. Tony rolls his eyes and grabs Harley's shoulder, pulling him towards his bed where a small box wrapped with a ribbon sits waiting.

"I'll take your stunned silence as a yes," he snarks, grabbing the gift and shoving it into Harley's hands. "Here. Here's a little something. Open it."

"Tony, you didn't have to--"

"I kinda did," Tony interrupts with a shrug of his shoulder. "Open it and you'll see."

Harley only hesitates for a moment longer before he's tearing open the gift with enlivened fervor.

"Woah," he gasps as he picks up the fancy accessory between gentle fingers. "Is this--"

"Yep. State of the art Smart Watch. Or Stark Watch if you really wanna call it that, since I did technically manufacture it myself. It's just like mine." He holds up his right wrist to show off the matching piece of technology. "I use it whenever I come here since JARVIS doesn't run in HQ or the house yet, really. So, this right here is a way for you to get into contact with him, and me also since your phone is still back in New York." Then Tony taps the screen twice and calls JARVIS' name. The AI answers immediately as the screen lights up.

"Good evening Master Harley. I hope you have enjoyed your stay in Italy thus far. Everyone back home dearly misses you including Mr. Hogan."

Harley laughs and grins before answering JARVIS. "Yeah, it's pretty cool out here. And tell Happy I say hi I guess." Then he looks up at Tony. "Thanks," Harley breathes softly, slowly beginning to strap it on to his own wrist.

"No problem kid. I'll let you explore all the fun things you've got on there. I got one for Pete too... just with a few more restrictions and a lot less willy-nilly freedom. Plus it'll give me a bit of peace of mind," he reaches over to help the kid fasten the device, "it keeps track of your vitals and it'll alert me if you're hurt or freaking out."

Harley grimaces. "Mm... a little less cool."

Tony laughs. "Alright, kid. Go get a shower. Most of your clothes should be tucked away in your dresser, and I think Mama bought and shipped a whole new wardrobe for you out here so we can bring it back with us. Then when you're done, and Pete's done with his bath we can go outside for a few moments to catch a glimpse of the stars before bed."

That caught Peter's attention. "We gonna go see stars now?!" He rushed away from the tiny trinkets he was nosing through and jumped at Tony, arms raised and insisting he be picked up.

“Yes, but after your bath. Alright?”

And that right there was bribery... and Tony finds that, yes, he very much likes bribery.

Later that night Tony, after Tony gives into Peter's demands to be dressed in his rocket themed pajamas and not the Scooby-doo ones the nurse laid out, both boys took their turns saying goodnight to Pepper and giving her a hug, or in Peter's case, a big kiss on both cheeks before Tony led them outside.

He carried Peter in one arm and a large sheet and several blankets in another for the chill that was sure to come as the night grew later. Peter's already wiggling violently in his arms, squealing, and shouting as he points wildly up at the darkening sky. Several stars peak through, many more than what typically adorn the New York sky, but the porch light is still on and so are several other lights lining the drive and other pieces of the property that interfere with a proper view for stargazing. So, Tony chuckles, already anticipating the craziness that's about to happen when Peter gets a *real* look at the galaxy.

He slowly sets Peter on his feet when they reach a nice clearing in the grass and drops the load of blankets into Harley's arms as he sets about laying out the sheet on the ground. There was no need for the boy's to get any more nature in their hair or pajamas...

He smooths out the corners and slowly sits down with a small grunt. Peter's quick to join him. The kid's at his side in a flash, pushing his body flush against Tony's in an excitable hug as he squeals. “Look’it ‘em all Daddy!”

Tony looks up, and there sure are a ton of them. He sometimes forgets to appreciate these small things when he comes to visit. Sure, when he was a kid, this was one of his most favorite things to do with Domencio or his mother. Just sit and watch the sky all night in hopes of catching sight of a shooting star so he could cling to a superstition he didn't believe in and make a silly wish. It was always the same wish... but now... he's happier than he thought possible being able to share something so simple with his kids, because it's something they'll remember for the rest of their lives. He sure as hell will.

So, he slowly leans back on the sheet, one arm tucked behind his head as he stared. Then he turns and gestures for Harley to join them on the sheet. There was more than enough room for the kid to have his own personal space, yet he still looked nervous as he took a seat a foot or so away from Tony's other side.

Once the kid is sitting Tony lifts his hand to his mouth and releases a loud, sharp whistle that breaks through the serene silence. “Barton, Lights!” He calls out, then a second later all the lights slowly flick off, one by one at his command, and then they're cast in a blanket of darkness. Then, their eyes adjust and it's almost like an explosion as the skies become clear and it seems almost as if they were peering into the heart of the Milky Way.

“Woah,” Harley breathes with a small chuckle under his breath as he stares. Then Tony looks at Peter to see the boy's reaction, and he isn't disappointed. The boy's mouth hangs open, eyes glossed over as the starlight glistens in his big Bambi eyes.

He kinda hopes the boy's sudden fascination with all things space doesn't fade any time soon.

They stay like that for a while. Tony just absorbs the tenderness of the moment, wishing Pepper were well enough to join them, and he closes his eyes and breathes in the fresh air. He listens to the crickets and cicadas and the soft chirping of frogs from the lake. It's peaceful and Tony doesn't think the figurative weight resting on his shoulders has ever been so light. Then, there's a tangible

weight laying on his left shoulder and one on his right that quickly follows it. He opens his eyes just in time to watch as Harley pulls a blanket over the three of them and the boys huddle closer to him for warmth.

It's silent and peaceful and Tony's grin is so big it'll definitely hurt in the morning and he thinks he just might be able to go to sleep out here under the stars.

"This is really cool Tony," he hears Harley whisper from beside him and he turns his head to see the boy's eyes had slipped closed in the midst of calmness of the night. Tony responds by squeezing the boy closer to him and lifting a hand to pet his hair softly.

"Tell us 'bout the bella stars, please." Peter requests in a whisper, tiny arm slinking over Tony's chest to hug their bodies closer together.

Tony thinks for a moment, sighing deeply as he reopens his eyes and gazes up at the twinkling lights for a spark of inspiration. He hums for a second then smiles as he slowly begins regaling them of the history of the different constellations, he would patiently help them point out in the sky.

By the time he pointed out all the constellations he could remember, he was hoping Peter would be satisfied, but apparently not. Every time he slowly finished one of the stories, he'd feel an insistent tap on his ribcage and Peter's whispered demand for "more".

And that's how he found himself going all deep and philosophical, which he had been deliberately avoiding to escape that endless rabbit hole of 'why's. He's pretty sure Harley must be bored out of his goddamn mind, but at this point he was more set on boring Peter to sleep so the kid wouldn't be all cranky in the morning. So he spoke softly and slowly, enunciating each syllable with the delicacy of a lullaby, hoping his soft tone and slow voice would pull the boy into a deep sleep.

"You know what I love about the stars?" Tony whispered into the night air.

"What?" Peter asks in an even softer whisper, voice giving away his curiosity and anticipation.

Tony turns and presses his nose into the boy's wild curls. He smelled like Watermelon...

"When you're looking at the stars you're seeing what happened in the past." He sorta pokes Peter's side to emphasize his dramatic whisper and Peter is completely in awe with his words.

"Really?"

"Yep," Tony smiles, remembering his reaction was similar when his mother told him the same thing. Then he tilts his head up to try and find one of his favorite stars... and he spots it, then lifts his arm to point. "See that bright star up there at the corner of Auriga? That one's named Capella and that little guy is over forty lightyears away from us. And that means it takes forty whole years for its starlight to reach us here on Earth so that we can see it. So, as we lay here right looking at him, we're actually seeing it when he was forty years younger."

"Wait really?" Harley interrupts. He props himself up on an elbow and shoots Tony a look with a dubious raise of his brow.

"Yeah. That's what light year means kid. Some of these stars we're looking at can be from like hundreds of years ago. Some of 'em could've already burned up and died by now, or the opposite. There are some that we can't see just because the light hasn't had enough time to reach us." Tony smiles and looks between the two kids with a mischievous pump of his brows. "So if you really think about it... if there are aliens out there by Capella and they're looking at us right now, then

they won't be seeing us right now. They'd be seeing us forty years ago. Which is what... when I was just a kid like you two."

"Aliens are real?!"

Well so much for boring him to sleep, Tony thought.

"Well, no. It's just a 'what if' Peter. There's a very good chance that aliens don't exist."

"Well I think they do," the little boy declared, arms crossing over his chest as he slowly stood on the sheet and looked at the sky. "Hi Aliens!" He shouts at the top of his lungs and Tony chuckles. "When you see me I'm gonna be as old as my Daddy! But my name is Peter!!" He raises his arms in the air and giggles before falling back to his knees and collapsing on his father's chest and cuddling close.

"I'm sure they'll get the message forty years from now..." Tony could practically feel Harley roll his eyes and he chuckled. Then he checks the time on his watch and-- *oh boy*, well Pepper's going to kill him in the morning. "Okay boys. It's getting late--" Tony starts. Peter already seems to know what's coming and he whines, hugging the man's waist tighter.

"Noooo," he whines petulantly, doing his darn best to keep the man from sitting up.

"C'mon Pete. We got all month to look at the stars. Maybe we can even get a cool telescope to look at 'em better. Now up you go." He swings the boy up into his arms and Peter grins at the prospect of the man's offer. Tony helps Harley gather the sheet from the ground and they make their way back to the house in the darkness.

He tells Harley to dump the blankets and whatnot onto the couch then head up to bed.

"Do you want me to come up and say goodnight?" To which the boy adamantly shook his head before fleeing towards his room.

Tony chuckles and carries Peter to his room, across from his and Pepper's. He gently tucks the covers over his body and smiles down at him. "Goodnight Petey. Go to sleep."

"But I not tired yet." Peter immediately whined, arms lifting towards him as his face puckers in a cute pout.

"It's time for bed Pete. You must be tired after playing outside all day and waking up so early."

"Noo," he whines again, little lip jutting out as if he were about to force himself to cry. "Please. Tell me more 'bout space, Daddy."

Tony wants to be upset. He wants to be frustrated and exasperated with Peter's new obsession, but he can't help but find it amusing and adorable. So, he smiles to himself and crouches beside the bed. He lifts his hand and gently combs it through Peter's hair. "You're just Daddy's little space nerd, aren't you?"

"Mhm," Peter grins, nodding his head enthusiastically and blinking lethargically as he reaches out to hold Tony's hand.

Tony obliges and takes the boy's tiny fingers, rubbing his thumb along the back of his knuckles as he quietly thinks of a simple and sweet story about space that he wasn't totally pulling out of his ass...

“Alright Bub. Settle in, cuz I’m ‘bout to tell you the tale of a sweet lonesome dwarf planet named Pluto.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok so this chapter's very much a filler chapter, but who cares? As long as y'all enjoyed it ;)

[EDIT] Here's another reading pitstop everyone for whoever needs it. You know who you are. Stop, go to sleep, go eat, or go pee. Just keep the tab open and Ao3 will keep your place. I promise nothing interesting will happen without you ;)

So lemme know your thoughts, theories, and ideas. You know I love hearing from ya and Stay safe out there guys. Love y'all to pieces!

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Ok guys! Sorry for the ridiculously long wait... I'm literally in the middle of renovating the place I just moved into and my computer is currently without a home so... it's been tough. But after all this is over I plan to be a little more regular (yes, I know I keep saying this and it never happens, but I'm gonna try anyways). So, yeah... that being said, I apologize again and I hope this was worth the wait... enjoy

Oh and remember the italics in dialogue usually mean the person is speaking Italian, just fyi.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony wakes to a sharp sting throbbing against the front of his skull and sunlight flashing against his closed eyelids. A grimace forms at his mouth and he squeezes his eyes shut to ease the pain. He feels unsteady and disoriented, but he quickly shakes it off and forces his eyes open. He squints out at the sun lifting over the horizon of an abandoned water bay. Then he quickly comes to the realization that the scenery is moving by rather quickly... Then he hears the rumbling of an engine and the unsteady movement that came with driving down an unkempt road. He's in a car.

He grimaces again, annoyed and pissed, because his head is throbbing and he can feel the dried blood caking half his face every time a muscle in his face moves. He turns his head, hiding a scowl as he takes in the side of a gridded barrier between him and a familiar driver behind the wheel. At the sight of the man, he couldn't help but chuckle under his breath in abject amusement.

"Mm" he hums with a quirk of his lips, glancing back out the window in the backseat, "nice spot you've picked."

Tony sees him stiffen, but the man tries to hide it and adjusts his shoulders to play along with Tony's indifferent demeanor, plastering on a smug smile of his own-- which Tony could tell was obviously fake as hell. "Glad you approve. You'll be here for quite some time."

Tony shows off his teeth with a smug grin, eyes half lidded as he continues his fight with the migraine. He looks back out the window and recalls the details he's learned about this particular man over the past few days. He was a dirty cop... or, better put, he was loyal to a dirty cop who was on the payroll of a dirty politician... A lot of dirty people in the world nowadays, and he's been growing sick of it.

It was hard to find good people with good hearts and good intentions...

"Y'know, I'm a bit curious about you Rogers," Tony muses with his gravelly voice. His throat is dry and sore and his usual smooth tone now sounds rough and rigid. He props his elbow up on the door and rests his chin in his palm as he watches the sun creep higher over the water. "When'd you know you wanted to play the part of a dirty cop?"

And there it was... Another stiff roll of the shoulders. He'd hit a nerve.

"Got tired of lettin' you slip through my fingers. Besides with the way the system's been screwed,

there's much more profit on the other side of the law. You should know that better than anybody Stark."

*"Oh I know," Tony chuckles with a sadistic grin, "I also know you're lying... I can tell your hearts not into it. I've been watching you and your righteous as all hell ass for a while... Now, your Chief-- Schmidt-- **he** does it for the money... but I think you got a different MO."*

Steve rolls his neck and scowls. He doesn't say a word.

*"**I think** you've come to realize, after all your years of service, that true justice doesn't just mean always following the rules. You think that this is probably your only chance to do good for the world by officially ridding it of me. You realize that if you're not restricted by the biased and stringent rules a cop's gotta follow; you can just haul me on out here and shoot me in the head without having to worry about me walking free after planting a corrupt judge at my trial and hiring the best team of lawyers money can buy... of course, that's just one example. There are plenty more advantages on the other side of the law. But, y'know, I've gotta tell ya... we're looking for the same thing here Rogers. By getting rid of me you'll only be openin' more doors for trouble. I'm the last hope this world's got. It's on its last legs and it's only a matter of time before humans ruin society beyond repair."*

Steve laughs. "Sure, Stark. Believe what you want. You're smooth talkin' psycho-babble isn't gonna make me change my mind. You deserve what you're getting. There'll be a lot less problems once you're gone. That I know."

Tony's small smile never breaks as he now sits forward and stares out the front windshield at the long deserted side road they were driving on. "See, now why don't I think you truly mean that?"

"What difference does it make if I mean it or not?" Steve retorts, just a bit annoyed with the man's smugness after being outright told he's gonna die.

"The difference... well... since you don't mean it, I'm gonna let you live."

That's when Steve really starts to laugh. Head thrown back as his condescending laughter echoes through the cabin of the car because the circumstances were so ridiculous. Tony chuckles along with him. "Yeah... you see I've got big plans for New York. Got plans for a nice Tower and everything. It's gonna be great. So that means I'm gonna need someone on the inside and I think you might actually come in handy. And you'll learn. Soon you'll be able to see past the flaws you think you see in my way of doing things. You just need to look deeper... stop taking everything at face value and take a look at the bigger picture."

Steve gives one last chuckle and turns his head to glance at Tony from his peripherals, the corner of his lips lifting patronizingly. "Ah, I see. So I guess that means I'm working for you now, huh?" He teases.

Tony grins, nice and wide as he presses his forehead against the hard plastic grid between them. "That's right, Mr. Rogers. But I've got a couple rules to go over with you first..."

Steve's small smile drops into a frown as he quietly listens to the serious, overconfident tone of the man in his backseat with vague interest.

"One," Tony growls, speaking slowly so the man doesn't miss a single word, "you so much as hurt anyone without my say so... and I'll kill ya. This may come as a shock to you, but I'm not particularly fond of killing people, but I've been told I'm pretty damn good at it."

Steve stares at him through the rearview, brows furrowed in both confusion and alarm.

*“And two,” a teasing grin crosses Tony’s face, serious tone dripping with satisfaction as he shrugs his shoulders, “you’re gonna have to be a bit more smart when it comes to stuffin’ bad guys in the backseat of your car. You gotta search them **properly** .”*

Then he lifts his cuffed hands to reveal the small, specially made flash grenade for instances just as this. He pulls out the pin and drops it so it rolls to the front of the car. Then next thing Steve knows, there's a small blast beneath his seat and he loses control of the car. It flips and skids along the road. Then everything went dark.

Tony grimaces at the feel of his new bruises beginning to form and he kicks out the back windshield with a pained grunt. He crawls out the car and takes in the damage done for a moment before making his way to the drivers side and pulling out Rogers unconscious body from the broken window. The guy was big and bulky so it took some effort, but soon Tony had him out on the asphalt, face down amongst the shards of glass and he rummages through the man’s coat pockets for the keys to his handcuffs. He frees himself then takes the man’s gun...

Then he walks away, rolling his shoulder and tucking the weapon into his waistband as if nothing ever happened.

Steve remembers the encounter well. It was when all this chaos in his life started. He kind of wished he just turned a blind eye to Stark like every other cop in the state, but no, he had to go and be his righteous self and try to take out the most notorious crime boss the world’s ever seen all by himself.

He yawned, pressing his hand to his face to cover his mouth. He hadn’t slept in well over 24 hours and it was starting to catch up with him. First he gets found out and now he’s a target for the FBI, and his best friend is probably gonna be a target for the President himself if he doesn’t check his goddamn phone messages soon.

Rhodey had filled him in on most everything on their ride out to the safe house in New Jersey, and well, some of the developments he’d learned weren’t so much a surprise, but others... well... he never realized how corrupt the world had really become. He wasn’t sure whether it was better to be ignorant of the downward spiral society was headed into, or prepared.

And now he was witnessing it first hand...

Rhodey had both men tied to separate armchairs, bound and gagged as he injected something into their necks with a syringe. The two officers that had been on guard were piled near the door, freezer bullets punctured into their backs, between their shoulder blades.

Then, minutes later, the gags had been removed and the two men were writhing against their restraints, foaming at the mouth.

“You know what this is?” Rhodey growled softly, getting right in one’s face and holding up the empty syringe for them to see. “This is something Tony uses for very special occasions, and I’ve taken liberty to mark it as such.” The man groaned, eyes rolling to the back of his head and Steve was worried that he might have just died, but Rhodey didn’t seem worried...

“Now, it will only get worse with each dose, so I’ll let this settle in you for a while... let you get a feel for it, then I’ll ask you my questions and you best tell me what I want to hear or you’re not gonna like me very much.”

Steve changes his mind... he's very glad he's on Stark's side. When Rhodey meets him in the small kitchen he sets, the canister holding the full syringes on the counter and offers him a small smile.

"What, um... what was that you gave them?" He nods towards the two men seated in the Living Room, skin practically bright red as if it were burning them from the inside out.

Rhodey purses his lips, trying to think of an explanation. "Tony and Bruce are the guys behind the science of it, but from what I know, it's basically a reverse anesthetic. It's like a *really* strong dose of cocaine. Makes them feel every small thing and drives their senses haywire. The smallest poke can feel like a bullet wound if the dose is strong enough. And it keeps the mind so they can't focus on anything except their overloading senses. Tony actually got the idea from Ten Rings, or... Hydra, really... Or maybe it was another idea he got from Extremis... I can't remember. Either way, it just makes everything really painful."

"Makes sense. Wouldn't that just muddle the mind though," Steve questions, "If they can't think straight like that?"

"Well yeah, of course," Rhodey nods, "that's why I'm not hounding them right now. You gotta wait till it's run its course, then they'll be worn out and ready to talk. Then we just slap these things on 'em" he holds up a couple thin white patches used to record and analyze several things such as heartbeat, voice modulation, and about a million and one other factors related to lying that Tony had thought up, "and we find out what they know."

Steve won't say he's comfortable with the whole "torture" aspect of the job, because he's not, but it's a necessary evil he supposes. And if these men were willing to take a shot at an innocent kid for some quick cash... then he supposed they might deserve it. And, well, they didn't admit much besides their affiliation with Hydra. They were hired hands... they only knew one thing, and... he may not know Tony as well as Rhodey does... but he's sure Tony won't be taking the report very lightly.

"It's the kid's Dad. That's all we were told. We don't know the name, or why, but he wants the boy dead."

The following week, they quickly fall into a somewhat stable-ish routine. Peter loved it, that much was obvious, and Pepper had even been cleared to leave the bed after a couple days; no more stress or anxiety to be found. Harley was adjusting slowly. He would probably stay locked up in his room if Tony didn't drag him out every now and again. And Tony thinks he would actually consider moving permanently if they were able. Get his family away from the toxic environment they'd been immersed in for too long.

Nightmares were practically nonexistent. Peter's obsession with the outside has only gotten worse and Tony doesn't know whether to consider that a good thing or a bad thing. It got to a point where he had to put special locks on the front and back doors so Peter wouldn't be able to sneak outside during the night after everyone had gone to bed. He supposes it's good the kid has the opportunity to experience the outdoors, but that makes Tony dread having to go back home to smoggy New York even more. He'll have to look into getting a base upstate... they were gonna need more room soon anyway, and definitely a place he'd be able to lie low when times got bad.

However, there's still several things that need to be taken care of before he could ever rightfully consider disappearing from the city. Too many people depended on him.

So, he enjoys the peace while he can. He abides by Pepper's no work rule the whole first week just

as she requested... mostly. She had wanted them to have a normal vacation as a normal family. So instead of helping Thor and Loki take care of the many things that could only be done with him or Rhodes present, he used his time to teach the boys how to be boys... it's not like he was very familiar with the concept himself, but with a little reassurance from Pepper and with a few tips from Barton, he thinks he might be doing an okay job.

Harley loved fishing apparently, and, well, they've tipped the canoe over in the middle of the lake far too many times for Tony to consider it enjoyable, but at least the kid got a kick out of it. Plus, it was one of the only times when Harley's moodiness wasn't as prevalent, and they were able to hold a normal conversation without being at each others' throats.

Pepper babied him, just as she did Peter, and, okay he understands the kid's been having a tough time with things... but he was still working on handling his temper and the kid just seemed to know how to press all the right buttons. But the bonding activities seemed to have been doing them some good...

The first day Pepper was released from the confines of their bed, she insisted they all go outside together. And Peter, being the exuberant child he was, immediately started up his begging to go in the pool just as he'd been doing the past couple days while a few hired hands had been busy cleaning it out for them. They had finally finished and the pool was ready. So, Tony may or may not have run the boys down into town to grab them swimsuits as Pepper got ready for the day. Tony came back with far more swim toys and floaties than any one family would need, but Peter *and* Harley were happy so that was the good thing. Pepper had floated in one of the lounge chairs and Harley splashed around and walked through the shallow end while Tony worked at smeared sunscreen on Peter's flailing arms and his already pinkened cheeks.

So, the rest of the day they had swam around in the pool. Tony busied himself trying to teach both boys how to swim so he wouldn't be at risk of a heart attack every time they went near the pool or lake, Peter most often giggling and clinging to his back as he helped guide Harley through strokes to the deep end and back.

Harley could stay afloat in the water long enough, but he depended too much on something to hang on to when it came to the actual swimming. Like, when he gets tipped into the lake while fishing, he's always got the floating canoe to cling to, or a drowning Tony's back before he starts swimming them back to shore. One of the reasons he refuses to let Harley go out on the lake alone.

Anyways, that was the day Tony learned that Peter was either far more rebellious than he thought or he wasn't as bright as he had originally predicted. As time passed though, he found that it was indeed the former because surely no child could be so stupid. He swears the number of times the child hurled himself into the pool while his back was turned, *without* his floaties on, should never have exceeded past the first time. And no matter how many times Tony would panic after hearing the splash from behind and scoop the child up from beneath the water only to have him cough, and cry, and sob, and complain about a stinging nose... he did the same ten minutes later after Tony's strict instructions to "*stay*", as if he were expecting for a different outcome, or simply wanting to piss his father off, because surely that manic little giggle after Tony finished lecturing him wasn't simply a coincidence. That was when Pepper insisted the boy keep his floaties on, even when Tony sat him on the steps of the pool to race Harley underwater.

That had been quite the day. And that night, just as they've done every other night that week, Pepper joined them outside to look at the stars. It was by far the most perfect thing in the world, and Tony couldn't help but grin to himself when Peter had excitedly pointed out a shooting star and had excitedly made his wish just like Tony'd taught him... because, well... maybe wishing on a star wasn't totally bogus after all.

So, yeah, it was like they were officially a normal family now. For a whole week he was a normal man with a normal family. Not having to worry about some psychopaths he had locked up in his basement he had to figure some creative way to kill, or about who was most likely to take a shot at him next. Nope. Normal. They even had dinner as a family every night

Tonight, however, they were going to be having a couple guests for dinner... and Harley hasn't exactly been thrilled about it.

"*Harley, help Peter fix his hair ,*" Pepper spoke slowly in Italian, an effort she and Tony were both making to teach the boys the native language after Tony had started scheduling individual lessons for the both of them each evening. Peter's, while Harley was helping make dinner or cleaning the dishes, and Harley's after Peter went to sleep or during his nap after lunch.

Peter was catching on surprisingly quickly, being young and moldable still, but Harley found it just a bit more difficult and it only seemed to add to his constant frustration. "Help him with *what* ?" He asked slowly, a disheartened and confused furrow between his brows.

"Hair, Ha'ley. Hair!" Peter exclaims, tugging on the boy's sleeve to drag him towards the bathroom. The older boy didn't say anything, but his irritated scowl was enough to tell he was upset.

Pepper leafed a hand through the older boy's hair with a comforting smile as they passed her in the hall and she made her way to the kitchen to help Tony finish preparing their dinner while the boy's finished freshening up.

The Artinos arrived shortly after, with a bottle of wine and a basket of freshly made pastries for dessert.

"Antonio!" Domencio had exclaimed, hands reaching up to pull him down so he could be greeted with a kiss to both his cheeks. Emilia, his wife, did the same. "*It is so good to see you my boy.*"

After the brief greetings, Pepper took their gifts and invited them into the house. Tony led the way towards the kitchen with a smile on his face as he conversed with the older couple he had missed more than he had realized.

"*Where are your boys, Tonio ?*" Emilia questioned, glancing around their cozy home with a warm smile. "*Domencio has been talking nonstop about them .*"

"Ragazzi!" He yelled down the hall with a 'hurry up' command in his tone, and soon Peter was bolting down the hall , racing into the room with Harley not far behind him, moving at a much more leisurely pace. Peter eagerly greeted the couple, spewing words of both English and Italian as he strung together sentences using his newly learned vocabulary words. Any shyness or insecurity that had been in that boy when Tony had first met him has completely disappeared and he couldn't help but chuckle at the kid's exuberance.

"You are teaching them well, Antonio," Domencio grinned, speaking in English as he ushered Harley to come forward and greet him with a hug as well. "*It has only been a week and he is nearly a natural!*"

Harley accepts the hug without much protest because he knows there's no escaping it, but he doesn't make an effort to return the gesture. He's grown to accept the ungodly amount of touching that was common in the culture, especially after spending a couple afternoons with Thor, who happily kept him and Peter company outside when he and Loki came so Loki could speak with Tony, Clint, Natasha, and Asher about god knows what. . It was like the man had no concept of

personal space... not that Peter had been bothered by it in the least. Pepper hadn't been very pleased with Tony, but hey.

"Thank you. The boys are both catching on a lot quicker than we thought they would, so we decided to start speaking more Italian at home instead of English to help get them used to it." Pepper answered, waving them to follow her into the dining room. Domencio's arms remained around Harley's shoulders as the five of them followed after Pepper.

"Exposure therapy," Tony joked with a playful shrug.

"Oh, so I suppose no English tomorrow then, eh?" Domencio joked with a hearty laugh, nudging Harley in the side. Harley could only understand about half of what was being said... he really hoped he caught on soon because he was pretty sure they were talking about him. Why were they talking about him?

Tony, on the other hand, couldn't help but find the entire situation amusing as he guided Peter by the hand to his usual dining chair with the booster seat, beside his own spot at the head of the table. Tony glanced at Harley and smirked before responding to Domencio. *"We haven't told him he's going with you tomorrow yet, but he's probably sick of trying to understand what we're all saying. So I suppose a little English can be permitted. Isn't that right Patatino?"*

Harley only glares at him as he takes his usual seat beside his mother, which now also placed him across from Emilia.

They all settle in for dinner and the night goes well. They speak with a bit of English here and there for the boys' sake... and then after a few minutes of innocent conversation Peter does his Peter thing and blurts out something nobody had been expecting.

"Excuse me did you know Papa?" He asked Domencio suddenly as soon as there had been a moment's lull in conversation.

Tony nearly chokes on his sip of wine.

Not good.

Domencio's eyes narrow in slight confusion. "Papa?" He asks.

Peter nods, then clarifies. "Yes, Nonno. Daddy's Daddy."

The tension in the room is thick and Harley's not sure why, but the way Tony was watching Domencio as if the older man were about to snap did not make him feel good about it. He knew Howard wasn't the best guy in the world. Hell, he's pretty certain he'd abused Tony when he was a kid because, well, that's just what men like him did to their kids, but why would Domencio be more upset by it than Tony?

"Yes, I did know Antonio's father."

Tony was so confused about what had spurred the question on. They had simply been trading stories of when Tony had been younger and came to visit for the summer. And Peter had *never* brought up the topic before... and of course the kid chose the absolute *worst* person to discuss it with. Tony didn't even know Peter knew he had a father, which was ridiculous... Everyone had a father and he knows Peter knew that... but *still*. It wasn't a concept he thought Peter would pick up on at such a young age.

"Was he mean? I think he mighta been mean like Ha'ley's and mine Daddy's was. An' you're real

old, like, *older than Daddy* old.”

Tony glances over at Harley to see the boy shrink down in his seat just a bit. Then Tony sighs and reaches over to lay his hand over Peter’s smaller one to get his attention. “Mimmo let’s not talk about Nonno tonight, okay?”

“No,” Domencio agrees, plastering on a fake smile to ease the heaviness that had settled in the room, “let’s talk about *Nonna* instead!”

“*Domencio, you don’t have to,*” Pepper starts, a pitying smile on her face.

“*Nonsense,*” Domencio grins, taking a sip of his wine, “*I can talk about Maria Carbonell until my mouth runs dry.*”

And so then Domencio proceeded to tell Peter and Harley stories of their grandmother and Tony couldn’t help the reminiscent smile creep across his face as the older man spoke animatedly of the mischief Tony and his mother had created for the locals when he was a boy. It had always been an adventure when his mother was around, and he wished she had lived long enough to meet his children. They would have loved her... and she would have loved them... possibly even more than she had loved him if that were even possible.

That thought alone made him chuckle, a sad, but happy smile on his face. He didn’t cry... but he couldn’t deny the sharp sting behind his eyes as he watched both Harley and Peter grin and laugh. He missed her...

The rest of the night proceeded normally, without any more surprise questions on Peter’s part. They finished dinner then enjoyed the desert Domencio had brought with him. By the time they were finished, it was past time for Peter to head in for bed. So Domencio and Emilia took their leave when Peter started throwing a fit about not being able to go outside and watch the stars as they usually did because of the late hour. Tony promised him an extra story to compensate, which calmed him enough to hug and kiss his uncle and aunt goodnight.

So, Tony worked on getting Peter ready for bed while Pepper and Harley discretely settled down in the Living Room to pick a movie to watch before bed.

Peter went down easy after a story from his bookshelf and one of Tony’s now infamous science lectures he now demanded every night before bed. This night they covered the topic of quantum mechanics, which thankfully put Peter right out lickity split. So, after he put Peter down, he went back out to the Living Room to join in for whichever movie Harley picked out for the night.

Then the next morning, Tony was awoken the same way he’d been woken up every day the past week. Peter sitting on his chest, hands squishing his cheeks together with an insistent whisper of “Daddy, daddy, daddy” as he bounced. Tony groaned and grabbed Peter’s wrist to pry his hands away from his face. He turned his head to glance at his bedside clock. He groaned at the early hour-- even though he knew it was coming-- and he rubbed his eyes as the corners of his lips quirked up in amusement. The kid woke him up just in time to watch the sunrise... again

He got up though, still clad in his sweats and tank top, yawning so big his jaw cracked as he grabbed the throw blanket draped over the couch as he passed, and he carried Peter, on his hip, outside onto the porch as the boy chatted in his ear, far more awake than he should be at this ungodly hour. But he knew the kid would crash soon, because, well, they’ve done the same exact thing every morning and Peter never lasted longer than a full hour. Tony took a seat on their porch swing, Peter settled comfortably in his lap with his back pressed up against his chest. And Tony rocked them back and forth, just as he did every morning, silently watching the sun rise together

over the horizon until Peter eventually nodded off thanks to the continuous rocking of the swing. So, Tony holds him, cradled in his arms like a young baby, enjoying the comforting lull of the swing swaying back and forth. After an hour or so Pepper joins them, handing Tony his fresh cup of coffee, just the way he likes it, as she settles down next to him on the swing. They sit and enjoy the morning fresh air.

“Harley’s going with Domencio today. Do you want me to take Pete with me to the base so you can have a “you” day?” Tony whispers softly so he doesn’t wake Peter.

“No, I want him here. We’ll be fine. I’ll have Elena help us bake some cookies or something.”

“Ok,” Tony nods, wrapping his spare arm around her shoulders and pulling her closer to kiss the side of her head. “Just keep an eye on him. He’s been gettin’ sneaky and he’s gonna try to weasel on outside and he’ll end up drowning himself in the lake or the pool with how careless he is.”

“Do you not trust me with your precious baby, Honey?” She teased, looking down at the boy swaddled in a blanket, tucked close to his father’s chest.

Tony frowns and huffs at the tease.

Pepper smiles, lifting her hand to comb through the little boy’s night time curls. “We’ll be fine, Hon. He’s only reckless when you or Harley are around to provoke him. He’s nothing but a doll for me.” She teases him with a smile and Tony scoffs at her.

“We both know Harley’s the instigator.”

“What am I?” The boy in question scoffs with a frustrated crease to his brow as he stumbles his way towards them with a blanket clutched in his arms to wrap up in. He still looked half asleep. Hair a mess, eyes half closed, and patterned pajamas still rumpled from his night of sleep.

“We’re just discussing how much trouble you are sweetheart,” Pepper teases, leaning away from Tony to hold out an arm as an invitation for Harley to join them on the swing. He doesn’t hesitate like he would have if he were fully awake and, instead, curls up beneath her arm and closes his eyes as Pepper helps tuck the blanket around him to protect him against the cold morning air as Tony continues to push the swing back and forth with the toes of his feet.... just as they did every morning.

A comfortable silence settles over them as the birds begin their morning chirps. Several minutes of silence pass as the family enjoys the freshness of the morning and Tony savors the feeling of unbridled love. Then he glances at the time on his watch as he finishes off his coffee in one last sip and sighs. It was time for him and Halrey to start getting ready.

“Harley, I’m dropping you off with Domencio and Emilia today. I’ll be leaving here in a few minutes so get up and start getting ready.”

“What?! Why do I gotta go with them? Why can’t I just stay here with Mom and Peter?”

Peter stirs awake at his outburst and Tony frowns, slowly moving him to settle next to Pepper as he stands from the swing. “I’m going in to do some work today. You can’t go outside without supervision and Asher’s the only one staying behind...” he fixes Harley with a look before continuing. “You’ll be bored out of your mind having to stay inside all day and I think it’d be good for you to start meeting with the locals. Think of it as good publicity or something if that helps. Plus, Domencio wants to have seperate days with you and Peter to get to know you two.”

“He’s not even family,” Harley grumbles, marching into the house, “why does he care?”

Tony frowns deep, but he doesn't lash out. Instead, he follows the kid into the house. "He's the closest you'll ever come to having a grandfather, kid. You better appreciate him."

"*What do you think, my boy ?*" Domencio questions, holding up two different curtain patterns that Emilia had sent them into town for, along with a long list of various groceries which had them bouncing around from stall to stall.

Harley had not been amused when she told them. He still wasn't.

The day had been boring as hell. Whatever boredom Tony thought he would be plagued with while stuck inside all day was nothing compared to following an old, talkative and indecisive man around a town square. The man knew everybody and their mother and it only made it all the more aggravating when Harley had little to no idea what they were saying. Sure, his Italian was getting better, but Tony and Pepper always spoke slowly so he could understand each word... these people... they talked so fast it would've been hard to follow if it were English. He understood *nothing* except for his name, Tony's name, and "papà". So... he supposed he sort of did have an idea what they were talking about, and quite frankly, it kinda pissed him off.

So when Domencio held up the two curtains for his opinion, he rolled his eyes and growled under his breath, pointing harshly to the one on the right before crossing his arms over his chest and exclaiming. "Can you just take me back home, now?"

He knew it was rude, and he knew Tony would throw a fit if he found out he was being a brat to Domencio, but he was just so done. He was done with random people on the streets staring at him as they pass by, and he was done wandering around to random shops only to have more strangers excitedly greet him with an excited handshake and a string of gushing words he didn't understand..

Domencio offered him an apologetic smile and slowly turned to pay the vendor for the chosen fabric. Harley felt just a little bad; *just a little though* .

Then Domencio led him away from the shop and towards the center of the market square to a cutesy little fountain and he took a seat, patting the empty spot next to him. Harley obliged, glad to finally get off his feet. Domencio rested a hand on his back, and Harley had to fight himself not to pull away. Then he held out his palm to reveal a small coin, offering it to Harley and speaking in his accented English.

"Would you like to make a wish?"

Harley gives him a look, because *No* . He doesn't want to make a dumb wish. He's not a *child* . He doesn't believe in that crap. But maybe if he indulged the man, they'd leave quicker.

"Sure,": he quipped with a forced smile, grabbing for the coin and tossing it into the fountain without a second thought.

Domencio didn't seem perturbed by his discrete rudeness and simply laughed. "Oh, I hope you made it a good one papatino."

Harley rolls his eyes again at his sickly sweetness.

"You know," the older man hums, gazing around at the people trickling through as they smiled and visited with familiar faces, "I used to bring your papà here all the time when he was a young boy. He'd always make the same wish."

"*Please, Zio, please!*" Young Tony begged, gripping the edges of his uncle's sleeve, tugging

adamantly and pointing towards the fountain a few yards away. "I need to make my wish!"

"What do you need to wish for Mimmo?"

"I told you I can't tell, or it won't ever come true!" Tony replies the same way he does every other time Domencio questions him. "I'll tell you when it does, though. I promise."

"Why must you wish for something every day, Antonio?"

"Mama says I gots to wish every day if I want a wish as big as mine to come true."

"I see," Domencio nodded with a smile, handing over a coin so the boy could run over and make his wish. Tony gives him a quick hug and takes off towards the fountain to make his wish once more.

"What did he wish for?" Harley questioned with just a tad of curiosity. He opted to ignore the father comment, knowing the man would be by far more stubborn about it than even Rhodey was. He knows nothing about Tony other than the few things he's heard in passing and the stories his mother used to tell to him before bed. Even despite how close most would think they were... he and Tony rarely had very extensive conversations about him personally

"He never told me," Domencio smiled. "But he did promise to tell me when his wish came true."

Harley studied him for a moment then furrowed his brows. He recalls the night a few days ago when Tony taught Peter how to wish on a star... maybe his wish still hadn't come true. But he shook the thought from his mind because Tony was a grown man and he surely wouldn't believe in something so ridiculous.

Then he sees the reminiscent smile on the older man's face and he can't help but question whether the man was really just an old friend... or if he was something more. He remembers the night before when he could pick up parts of the conversation regarding Tony's younger years. And then he remembers the harsh tension in the room when Peter suddenly brought up Tony's father. Howard. There was definitely some piece missing to this puzzle, and he's never really enjoyed being left out of the loop. "How do..." Harley begins slowly before he slowly tapers off and begins again. "How were you so close with him when he was a kid... I doubt... you're a civilian?"

"Well," Domencio smirks. "I suppose in some ways I was."

Harley paused... *like that helped clear anything up*. If anything, it just brought up more questions.

"But yes, me and your father were quite close when he was younger."

"Like... like as close as he was with Jarvis?"

Domencio sighed with a sad frown. "Well, Tonio was around Jarvis far more than he was me. I was only ever able to see him sparingly during the summers when he came to visit with his parents. Though... when Edwin died... that was a terrible time for everyone."

Harley remembers reading about Edwin Jarvis' death online... right after Tony introduced him to AI JARVIS, he had done a little research himself because he was certain he had heard the unusual name before, and he'd been right. 1985. Shot. Body dumped in Oyster Bay. Found 3 days later. Shooter unknown. Motive unknown. There had been conspiracies on reddit and Buzzfeed... and maybe Tony knew what had really happened, but he's never had the guts to ask... but maybe Domencio knew. He seemed to know just about everything a civilian like him probably shouldn't.

“Um... what happened to him? Do you know? I-I’ve read theories about it online, but none of it really seems right.”

Domencio gives him an odd look, like he’s trying to study him, but then he looks away. “I have my own theories as to what happened... but I don’t know the true story. All I know is Tonio was never the same after that. In fact, you actually remind me of him when he was your age. Before all that mess tore him down.”

Harley tries to hide his sad smile... he knew Tony had been through a lot as a kid, but it never really settled *how much* .

“Bet he was nothing but trouble,” he mumbled with a soft chuckle.

Domencio chuckled too, laying a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Oh yes. He was quite the handful. He was just eager to please and prove himself just like you, but his mother kept a pretty good handle on him, just like Pepper does you..”

“I don’t have to prove anything to anybody though,” Harley quickly argued.

“Of course you do. Every boy strives to prove his worth to their father and you still have so much left to learn--”

Harley’s mouth opens to argue once more, but Domencio hushes him with a soft smile.

“Don’t worry about it Mimmo. Tonio expects nothing more from you than what you can give. He is a loving and reasonable man. He got that from his mother.”

Harley can hear the man’s unspoken words “ *unlike his father* ”. It’s spoken through the lingering bitterness in his tone. Harley wants to bring it up... he’s dying of curiosity... but with the way the older man had reacted when Peter sporadically brought it up, he didn’t know if he should. So far he had been so calm and easy with every question or snark Harley had thrown at him... how bad could he hate Howard Stark to elicit such an angry reaction? That only made him more desperate to know. He’s heard the rumors. He knows the guy was a prick.

Hell, it’s not like he’d ever be able to ask Tony these questions without worrying he would lose his temper or be sent into another panic like the last time he’d pushed a bit too much with his questions.

Could Domencio be any worse than Tony? He was an old man... a civilian. The guy just probably had some pent up resentment or something... but he just wanted to know.

Hell, he’s never had a sense of reason so why should he start now.

“You’re mad,” he states simply, eyeing the man carefully. “You’re mad at Howard, aren’t you?”

The man stiffens and he doesn’t look at Harley. “I am, but that is no secret, child.”

“Why are you mad at him?” He pushes. “Other than for him being a straight up dick, of course.”

“For many reasons I should probably not disclose to you, Mimmo.” Domencio forces out, nostrils flaring, but Harley’s on a roll now. There’s no way he’s backing out now when he’s already waded halfway in.

“There’s a reason you hate him so much though... and if you hate *him*... then why do you love my dad so much? Or is it because you love Tony that you hate him?” He curses himself at his own

slip, but it was just that: a slip.

Domencio's body sags with a tired sigh, one heavy with pain and sorrow. "He was not the kindest of men." He finally settles with, and all Harley could think was *no shit Sherlock*.

"What did he do though? Did he really do all those things to Tony that people say he did?"

"That and more." Domencio frowned and turned to look at him. "Your father had been through more pain in his first ten years of life than any man should ever have to endure through their entire lifetime. And it's all because of that bastard father who claimed to love him."

"What did he do?" Domencio whispered in horror as Maria ushered him in through the back door with a pinched look on her face and tears trailing down her pink cheeks.

"Howard snapped his wrist," Maria whispered through a muffled sob, hands pressed to her face.

He pulled her in for a hug, hand lifting to pet down her mess of frizzy hair as she cried into his chest. "Christ Maria," he breathed, "what'd he do this time?"

"I don't know," she sobbed, "he locked himself in his room, and Howard's in his office."

Domencio lets go of her slowly and pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. "My Dear, stop crying. It is not your fault."

"Dom," she cries, face puckering as sobs wracked her body once more, "I just don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. What am I going to do?"

He shushes her, slowly rubbing her back. "I'm going to check on him. You just make sure Stark doesn't come down and find me."

He finds Tony's door and knocks softly. "Mimmo," he whispers, forehead pressed against the wood, "It's me. Can I come in?"

The door unlocks slowly and soon he's met by the sight of a thirteen year old Tony. Swollen eyes, greasy hair, and a wrist bent at a very odd angle. Domencio immediately envelops him with a hug, and the teen remains stiff as a board just as he's been the past two years whenever any person tries to hug him. Domencio doesn't let go though. He holds onto him until Tony eventually wraps one arm around his waist and his face pressed into his shirt.

"I'm sorry Zio. I didn't mean to make him mad again."

"Do not apologize for your father Cuore Mio. You did nothing wrong."

"But I did!" Tony argues, jaw tight. "I messed up!"

"Tell me what it is you think you did wrong."

Tony pulls away and wipes harshly at his eyes, left wrist cradled close to his chest. Domencio lets himself into the room and quietly shuts the door behind him before settling himself on the empty spot the boy had left for him on the edge of the bed.

"Dad put me in charge of some of the new guys that got brought on while we were gone," he wiped his sleeve beneath his nose. "Um... and-and I thought I was doing fine, y'know. Everyone was having a good time and everything. I had them run a few drills and things were great. But then Dad shows up to watch for a few minutes, and-and one of the younger guys screws up. He was cool

and I liked him. Good guy... but I think Dad was expecting me to, like, behead him or something cuz he flipped the hell out when I told him it was no big deal.” Tony rolled his eyes as if he were simply annoyed and not at all traumatized by his father’s actions. “I don’t like doing things his way, y’know. Everyone’s all scared and depressed all the time when he’s around and I don’t want it to be like that with me. I just don’t think screaming and punishing people is the best way to earn their loyalty and respect. Or am I just crazy? Cuz, I mean, everybody loves Mom. They’ll do anything for her and she never yells at no one.”

Domencio chuckled at that. “Very true. And I don’t think it’s crazy. I just think it’s far more advanced than any meatheaded ancestor of yours has discovered for themselves. Even Nonno Carbonell. Boy, is that man stuck in his ways. I don’t know where in the world you or your mother got that sense from.” Domencio laughed at his own joke.

That elicits a small smile from the boy which Domencio finds to be an accomplishment.

“So how’d that end up happening?” He nodded at the deformed wrist the boy was cradling close.

Tony shrugged. “It’s nothing, really.” Even though they both knew it wasn’t.

*“He just passed it off as another one of his “lessons” with his whole disappointed face, like “I’m doing this for your own good, Anthony”,” Tony mimics his father’s voice with a sneer, “then he just snapped my wrist like it was a twig... I feel like there should have been more effort y’know,” Tony immediately began to deflect, holding his arm out to examine it. “I mean... I’m not bulky or anything but I’m not **that** scrawny. Plus I’ve been beefing up too, which you can probably kinda tell since it’s been a whole year--”*

Domencio places a hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t we get you to the hospital to get this thing set properly so the bone doesn’t heal wrong.”

Tony shakes his head and shrugs like it’s no big deal. “No can do. Dad says I gotta wait it out.”

“What?!”

“Yeah. His logic’s screwed up,” Tony rolls his eyes once again, “but he says that until I man up enough to inflict pain or whatever, then I’m gonna have to deal with it myself. So once this thing heals... which is gonna be a total bitch honestly, he’s gonna have one of the docs reset the bone so it’ll heal right. I think he’s hoping by then I’ll just give in...”

Domencio sighs and wraps his arms around Tony’s shoulders. “You’re one of a kind Antonio. The best man I’ve seen in a long, long time. One day you’ll change the world and your father won’t even know what hit him.”

“Did he ever give in?” Harley whispers, brows raised in worried curiosity.

Domencio shook his head. “No, he didn’t. I wish he would’ve, but the boy has always been stubborn. He has strong convictions; always has, and very few things can steer him sideways. He’s not like his father.”

Harley feels a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. The scars on Tony’s left hand; his sensitivity to his whole left arm. It explains a lot. He swallows then looks up at Domencio to find the man looking down at him with a sad smile. “That’s... he’s... why didn’t he just give in?” All he can think about are the times he gave in to Richard or his own father. The people he’s hurt just to save himself the pain. He’d never be as strong and resilient as Tony. He could never live up to

the name of a Stark. He'll never be strong enough, or brave enough.

He is related to Richard Parker after all... a coward.

"I think that might be something you need to ask him yourself."

Harley doesn't want to ask him. He doesn't ever want to ask Tony anything. He and Tony didn't exactly have that type of relationship anymore. He's worried that if he asks too many questions at this point... Well, nobody really likes being drilled with questions all hours of the day. He remembered early on though, back when he wasn't as worried about Tony getting fed up with him and his questions, Tony telling him about the terrible things Howard had done in general... but not in relation to him. Harley had always assumed though.

"*Let us go*," Domencio speaks up, standing from the ledge of the fountain when he catches onto Harley's downfallen expression. "*There are still things we need to get before we head back*. I can tell you more stories of your father back at the house."

"More stories of Howard being a dick?" He didn't want to hear any more stories about Howard... it made his own father sound like a walk in the park.

Domencio chuckled. "No, only happy stories. *Besides, I am sure your father does not want you knowing all about the abuses he faced as a child. That is not something you should be plagued with. The past is in the past.*"

Harley only understands half of what is said, but he's able to fill in the blanks... he just wishes he was half the man his new "Dad" was, because maybe if he was, the man would actually love him as much as he did Peter.

They continue walking from store to store and this time Harley isn't quite as annoyed with the whole ordeal. He chats with Domencio and a few of the locals, most of whom already know who he is and are beyond excited to officially meet him. He may or may not have totally copied what he's seen Tony do and totally schmooze them, despite the despondent feel in his chest from knowing he'd never be good enough to be what these people thought him to be.

They went about most of their day with little trouble, until they made their last stop at a little spice stall which happened to be owned by a nice little old lady. Domencio was happily chatting with her when Harley heard a bit of ruckus stir up a ways down the street. The older man remained oblivious, so Harley slipped a little ways through the crowd to get a look at what was going on, having every intention to return to Domencio's side as soon as he found out what all the ruckus was about.

His chest constricted in startled panic when he reached the scene.

"Sir, I'm gonna have to ask you to come with me." It was Asher. He was standing in front of an unfamiliar man, hand raised out in an authoritative manner as he gestured for the man to step forward. Wasn't Asher supposed to be guarding the house and protecting Peter and his mother?

"Back off!" The man hissed, taking a large step away from Asher, closer to the small crowd that was quickly being ushered away from the scene by a few other guys Harley recognized from the large dinner at HQ the other night.

"Sir," Asher's voice is stern and his gaze is serious, "Mr. Stark requests a presence with you. There's no need to keep him waiting. He will only track you down again."

What was going on? He feels a spike of anger roll through him. Asher was supposed to be with his Pepper and Peter. Who was with them? Who was keeping them safe?

The man turns to the crowd in a crazed frenzy. "He's not who you think he is!" he shouts. "He's taken away our freedom. He knows our every move and he's manipulated this whole goddamn world to think he's some sort of saint. He claims to be protecting you, but all he's done is take away your privacy. He's a tyrant and the longer you submit to him, the more power you will only feed to the beast. The world is next and if you don't stand up to his--" The man is silenced by a freezer bullet and he drops to the ground in a lump of limbs. He was speaking English... he sounded American.

What was going on?

The gun Asher was holding up slowly lowered back to his side and he made a vague hand gesture towards the man and two men behind him jumped into action and began dragging his body away.

Where the hell were the authorities? These guys were doing this in broad daylight in the middle of a very public place, there was no doubt the cops were gonna move in on them. How much of an idiot was this guy?! It's like he had no common sense!

He does a sweep with his eyes, making sure no squealing cop cars were headed their way... but then he sees two men, dressed in what looked to be police uniforms and his gut twists. Tony was always so careful with how he did these things, and now Asher was just going to ruin it-- then he sees them take one look at the undoubtedly not-so-legal scene taking place, and they turn on their heels and walk the other way as if they'd never noticed a thing.

Ok... what the hell?

Harley wants to say something. He wants to ask questions... so he shook himself out of his stupor and spoke up.

"Hey," he voices, eyes narrowed as he pushes his way closer towards the scene, "what's going on here?"

He is instantly the center of attention and all movement stops. Whether it's out of respect or surprise, he's unsure.

"Harley," Asher says at the same moment the men with him straighten their backs and greet him with a respectful "sir," and nod of the head, "what are you doing here?"

"My question first," Harley snapped. "You're supposed to be at the house, keeping a watch over things." He didn't mean to sound accusing, but that must have been the way it was taken, because Asher's eyes narrow in anger as the others take a tentative step away.

Instead of gracing him with a response, Asher ignores him and makes a vague gesture with his hands. The guys who had paused when he approached, jump back into action and start dragging the limp man towards a distinct black car. And, okay, that just pisses him off. Asher can't be allowed to just ignore him like that. All these people are here... witnessing Asher disrespect him. What if word gets back to Tony that he just curled up and took the beating without putting up a fight? Then Tony would realize how much of a lost cause he really is... that'd he'd never be a ble to be a true leader.

He needs to prove he's worthy of the respec. That he's worthy of holding the name Stark and the title that came with it.

And if all these people see him weak... see him allow this... he'll never earn *their* respect. And he remembers Tony's words from not so long ago... "*You need to command respect, and you need to deserve it. Do you understand?*"

He needs to command it.

"Hey!" He hissed, moving forward when Asher turned his back to him and began walking away. "Don't walk away from me." He didn't raise his voice more than he needed to, and he fixed his mouth in a neutral line to hide his temper. The crowd started murmuring behind him along with a few of the other soldiers who were standing to the side.

Asher turned his body to face him, eyes dark with an irritated glare.

"Your father sent me to take care of something important, kid."

Maybe it was the way he said it; disrespectful and degrading. It only fed his anger. "What's more important than keeping my family safe?" He forced out through gritted teeth. He was trying to keep his cool and not lose it on him like he did the last time... but the guy didn't make it easy.

"Listen, Sprout, I don't answer to you."

He heard a sharp curse word in Italian that Harley had heard Tony mutter one too many times. He turned his head to see who he thinks is Riccardo, wide eyed and as dramatic as he'd assumed him to be from the moment he met him a week ago. He would have laughed at the look on his face if he hadn't been so pissed.

And like he always does... he ends up losing his temper and jumps forward to aim a rough shove at the large man's chest.

"You can't talk to me like that," he growls.

Asher stands tall. "Listen kid. Let's not go at it again, alright. I know what I'm doing. Things are taken care of, so just go on back to your little shopping trip and ask your dad about it when he gets home."

Harley growls at him. He feels humiliated, and with the way everyone is staring at him... Tony's going to be disappointed in him forever. He'll never be able to prove himself. Then he feels a heavy hand land on his shoulder and he whips around to come face to face with Domencio. He looked... well to put it simply, he looked pissed. But not at him, thankfully.

"What's your name?" Domencio asks him, brows turned down in anger.

"Asher McAllister," Harley answers for him when the man in question says nothing, crossing his arms over his chest and shooting a scowl at the man.

"Well, Mr. McAlister, I'd advise you show this young man a little more respect. I'm sure you know who his father is and I don't believe he will be quite so pleased when he learns the disrespect you've been showing his son. And I'm sure young Mr. Stark here won't forget either when he's grown and taken over for his father."

Harley can see that Domencio's words got to Asher. He wished he would've been able to do it himself, but he supposes Domencio defending him was probably second best.

"I understand." He nods his head, but Domencio's not finished. He turns and hollers at the other men in Asher's command.

“ You and you stop pressing in on the crowd. The man is gone, the more you control, the more they’ll rebel, and the larger a scene you will create.” Then he turns back to the crowd. “ Everybody, the show is over. Why don’t we let Stark’s men pass along in peace. They’ve taken care of the swindler and thief, so let’s give them our thanks and move forward .”

And surprisingly... everyone listens to him.

“And you,” he points at Asher once more, “you best get on out of here before I lose my temper.”

Harley grins, as Domencio takes him by the arm and tugs him away.

“Thanks Zio,” Harley says shyly.

“It’s no problem Patatino. Men who don’t show proper respect to their superiors tend to irritate me.”

Harley scoffed. “You think I’m his superior? I’m only fourteen--”

“ You are a Stark , and in this country that means something. Your father has done so much for this country, and anyone who disrespects his family and his name can go straight to hell.”

Harley’s eyes widen. “Whoa okay. I didn’t realize it was that... um... serious...” they continue their walk back to the house in a comfortable silence until Harley recalls something. “Does everyone feel this way? Is that why the police didn’t come arrest Asher and the guys for kidnapping that dude?”

Domencio pauses and turns his head down to look at the boy. “Tonio doesn’t tell you very much does he?”

Harley rolls his eyes in exasperation, because, no, he really doesn’t.”

“No. He won’t tell me nothin’. Ever since he’s started thinkin’ of me as his kid, he won’t let me be part of any of his work stuff. He says I gotta wait till I’m like 18. Which is totally ridiculous.”

“Hm,” Domencio hums, “I’ll talk to him about it. It’s best to start your training early... but I suppose I can see why he wants to wait.” He gives Harley a meaningful look. “He’s probably just afraid of becoming his father.”

“He did have me training at first, but then I got hurt.” Harley kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk. “Now he’s all paranoid about it. I think he thinks I’m just super fragile or something... but I’m not.”

“Perhaps,” Domencio hums, a small smile on his face.

“I gotta find a way to show him I’m not fragile,” Harley continues his rambling, frown deep on his face as he schemes. “What do you think?”

Harley turns to the older man for his advice, and Domencio only nods his head, his smug smile growing wider. “Every boy strives to prove his worth to their father. Your time will come soon enough, Mimmo.”

Steve groans and grumbles as he falls into the driver’s seat of his police cruiser, shutting the door behind him. He rests his head against the headrest and let’s his eyes fall closed. It had been a ridiculously long week. Chief Schmidt resigned and his replacement was a total hardass, and he

was just waiting for the other shoe to drop. And there's no telling what drug lords or gang leaders he's pissed off by cutting short their privilege to walk around the city and do whatever the hell they wanted.

"You ready for work Rogers?" He felt the cold metal of a gun press against the side of his skull and he froze. He knew that voice all too well.

"I'm not any good to you in prison, Stark. Schmidt's mysteriously disappeared and there's no telling when he'll expose me as a dirty cop on his payroll!"

"No one will know about you. I've taken care of it," Stark answers coolly. "And besides you really think I'm stupid enough to go through all that trouble in recruiting you only to have the bastard unveil you're goody-too-shoe mask. Everyone'll think he's off enjoying retirement in a nice cabin in Colorado or something."

"Is that where he is? You paid him off?"

"No, Steve," he sighed with patronizing resignation. "He's in the trunk."

*Steve's eyes bugged out. **This trunk?***

"Nuh-uh Stark," he shook his head, no longer bothered by the cold metal against his head. "I've got my second chance to do things right, I'm not gonna throw it away to do your dirty work."

Tony made an unapologetic hiss. "The only problem with that plan though... I uh... I shot him with your gun." He held out the pistol for him to see, and sure enough... Then he heard the man chuckle, soft and hearty. "You'd have a pretty tough time explaining that one to your new chief, huh? So," he chuckles again, high-pitched and giddy, completely pleased with himself and Steve wants to do nothing more than punch him right in the face, "You'll be takin' another trip. But I'm not gonna be keepin' ya company this time around."

Steve grits his teeth and snatches his pistol away from the man in his backseat. "Where you want me to dump him," he mumbles in resignation.

*Tony only pats him on the shoulder. "I'll trust ya with this one pal. You decide. It's your head on the line after all. Oh! And expect a nice pay raise in the near future, **Captain** ." Then he gets out the car. "And say hey to Chief Carter for me will ya? Me an' her go way back." He pats the roof of the car. "I'll be in touch, Rogers. Stay outta trouble."*

And then he was gone as quickly as he appeared.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed! I know there was a lot going on this chapter... but hopefully things will clear up in future chapters. If not, well... let's just blame that on lack of sleep lol.

Anywho! Thanks for reading. Hope to hear from you guys! I love hearing your opinions and feelings.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Ok, yes, I know, it has been far too long. But I'm back. After going through 2 30oz boxes of goldfish and 3 gallons of tea... I've finally made it through. So, please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Get the Boss on the phone, now,” Reilly whispers into the phone, head tilting to the side to make sure no one had followed him into the old meeting room. “Tell ‘im it’s Reilly, and it’s important.”

He’s put on hold for a few minutes, which only feeds his agitation. His foot begins to tap on the tiled floor and he crosses his arms over his chest before he finally hears the annoyed gruff of an all too familiar voice.

“What is it?”

Reilly jumps right into it because he doesn’t know how long he has before Rogers’ loyal disciples come nosing around. “My two guys are dead. Rogers got ahold of their whereabouts yesterday and he got lose with ‘em. I’m thinking he went right to Stark with it, and your precious successor killed ‘em. Those were my best hitmen.”

“Well they apparently aren’t as great as you thought, because they *missed*,” the older man answers calmly with a small sneer. “I gave you the perfect opportunity to eliminate that child, and you failed. Instead, you Anthony was nearly killed, and that would have put an end to this entire operation! So, excuse me if I’m none too pleased with you right now, so I’d advise losing the tone.”

Reilly muttered under his breath, wiping sweat from his face. “I’m sorry, sir. I think I am just overwhelmed with the plan. Are you sure it’s going to work?”

“Did the men know your name?”

Reilly frowns, but answers despite his confusion.

“No sir.”

“Then, yes. This will work.. I know Anthony better than anyone; I’ve been watching him for years.” A low growl follows the statement and Reilly gulps heavily. “Now did you only interrupt my lunch to complain?”

“No, sir! I, um... I spoke to Sergeant Allen this morning to confirm Stark’s whereabouts. He also conveyed a message from Richard Parker, meant for Norman. He has a plan on how to get the kids out of Stark’s hands, and knock him down a peg or two.”

There was a long pause over the line, and for a moment Reilly thought the man had left the conversation altogether.

“Is it viable?”

“From what I can tell... it is perfectly viable. Though, Stark won’t be coming out of it unscathed.”

There’s another long pause, but at least he was expecting that one.

“Just make sure your brother understands what lines he is not allowed to cross. No matter how much I may respect him as a man, or scientist... I will not tolerate any disobedience. I liked Obadiah Stane just fine; at a time I would have even labeled him as a friend, but he had sent Anthony off to Afghanistan with an order to kill him, instead of my first wishes. I need him alive. If you think after the mistreatment the man has shown him, that Parker will be of sound mind enough to preserve the man’s life, then I’ll approve any assistance you wish to give Oscorp in releasing him. Anthony seems to have forgotten the first rule of being a Don, and he needs to be reminded.”

“Even if my brother is not of right mind, I can have someone else do what is needed, but I believe my brother is fully capable of executing his plan.”

“Very well. Get in touch with officer Grant and Ross. Set an extraction date and refine this plan of his. Let me know of any finalizations your team decides on.

“Stark, they’ve got the American fugitive you asked for.” Loki announced with his usual monotone carelessness after stepping into the room. Tony’s head pivoted back to look at him, away from the mess of papers and schematics he was mulling over with a group of his best scientists and high-ranked officials. Romanoff was with them, putting to use her spy skills to help plan the small raid for the small gang that was developing in Sicily. The President, himself, has asked him to take care of it, and, well, Tony couldn’t very well say no to an old friend, now could he?

“Where was he?”

“He was at the market, harassing Ms. Genovesi for money again. Your friend, Mr. Artino called it in. He said he knew you were probably lookin’ for him.”

Tony frowned then stepped away from the table. “Was my kid around?”

Loki nods, expression remaining neutral yet also portraying a stinge of worry as well. “Yes. He witnessed the whole thing as well as the man’s outburst. We also had to send McCalister to fetch him because he was the only low-profile soldier available who spoke fluent English, but we did send a replacement to your villa for the time being. Though, apparently, according to Riccardo and the others McCalister had a bit of a verbal altercation with the child when he tried to step in.”

Tony scowled... he’d have to deal with that later. He’d *told* Asher to back off. For now, he dismissed himself from the group, with instructions to continue without him and followed Loki back to the main office where the apprehended man was waiting for him. The man had been terrorizing the city ever since Rhodey had left after his bi-yearly check-in a few months ago. It hadn’t been a bigger deal than what his stationed men in the city couldn’t handle every now and again, until the man somehow learned of something he really shouldn’t have. And, well, he can’t very well risk letting him spread that type of information to the locals.

“You’ve got a lot of guts accusing me of such heinous things,” Tony states as he enters the room, raising his brows and folding his arms behind his back as he looks down at the man sitting in the chair placed in front of his desk.

“I’m only doing what’s right. The people deserve to know the things you do behind their backs. Nobody would stand loyal to you if they knew the truth.” Was the man’s clever response.

“Hm,” Tony nodded in agreement, “and that’s exactly why they don’t know.”

“The world is changing Tony Stark. People aren’t as apt to follow behind someone just ‘cause they got power anymore. They aren’t afraid to stand up for themselves. They want freedom. And they want a world without corruption. They’ll find out how you always happen to know exactly who did what, where they are, and when they do it, they’re gonna turn on you just like everyone else.”

Tony sighs. He leans back against the edge of his desk and looks at his shoes. “We live in an imperfect world my friend, and things will only get worse from here. People want to be protected, but they don’t want to know how they’re being protected. Ignorance is bliss... There needs to be stability, and justice. Just look at the people around this city; this country. Do they look bothered? No, they’re happy and they’re safe, because I’m putting in the effort, money, and manpower to protect them and they know it. That’s what’s most important. They may not know how I operate, but they understand that before I stepped in, things looked a lot worse. There are too many people trying to work around each other and too many systems and rules trying to coexist. It’s not going to work much longer. There needs to be one person, one system, one set of rules that *everyone* answers too. No favoritism, no loopholes, no tricks. Only then will people be able to feel safest.”

The man gulps, throat tightening in fear. “You’re talking about a dictatorship.”

“No,” Tony shakes his head, “I’m talking about unification. I’m not here to control every aspect of a person’s life, ‘cause buddy that’s a shit ton of work and I’d honestly rather not do that in my very limited spare time. I have a life of my own, y’know. All I plan to do is make sure people act like decent human beings, and I have a perfect, honorable, infallible system to ensure that security, as you already seem to know.”

“You’re-you’re insane. Are you kidding me?! People would never go for this.”

Tony shrugs. “Welp. It’s either me or Hydra. So go on and take your pick.”

The man pauses, as if he’s thinking about it. “You’re a power hungry tyrant and I’d never submit to you.”

Tony bared his teeth for a moment before his face fell neutral again. Then he turns to one of the guards stationed by the door with a roll of his eyes and a heavy sigh. “Let the record show *I tried* , at least.” Then in one swift motion he stepped forward, and lifted his hands, one to cradle beneath the man’s chin and the other atop his head. Then he jerks both away to elicit a dull snap and the man’s body hangs limp from the chair in front of him when he drops his hands and takes a step back, turning to grab a cigar from his desk as if nothing had even happened.

But then he hears a muffled squeak. His skin prickles and his spine goes erect. The guard near the door must hear it too because he’s reaching for his gun and just about ready to swing open the door before the door is thrown open itself.

Harley’s in the room moments later and the guard immediately stands down as the kid races towards him, and, yeah Tony’s surprised by the kid’s sudden appearance, but he was even more surprised when the kid wasn’t moving towards him. No, he reached the man limp in the chair, and grabbed his shoulders, then his face. He studies the man for a moment, before his shoulders slump and his face seems to fall.

“You-You killed him,” Harley accused, head lifting up to stare at him. “What did he... what did he even...” He trailed off, unspoken words floating in the air between them.

Tony ignores it. “Kid, what are you doing here? You’re supposed to be with Dom.” He removed

the kid's hands from the dead man's shoulders and began pushing him from the room.

God, this was exactly why he didn't want the kid coming with him today.

Harley shook him off, finally finding his words.

"Why'd you do that? What'd he do?"

Tony frowned. "Not that I have to explain myself to you... but he knew some things I couldn't risk getting out."

And then with one last good push they were both out in the hall outside his office, and the doors were being closed behind him, allowing the body to be taken care of without any spectators. Also, so he could get Harley away from the body, because that definitely wasn't something a kid should be seeing, he's pretty sure.

"What was it?"

Tony's brows furrowed. "That's not important," he dismisses quickly. "What I'd like to know, is why the hell you're here."

"I asked my question first," Harley retorts defiantly, crossing his arms over his chest. Tony forces in a sharp inhale and his nostrils flare.

Then he sees the moment flash across the kid's face when he realized what just spilled from his mouth. His face paled and his mouth pressed together in a firm line, but he didn't back down. So, Tony narrows his eyes.

"You maybe wanna try that again, kid?"

God, why does it feel like he's always fighting with this kid?

"Not really, no," Harley forces out, voice hoarse with nerves, but he clears his throat and stands a bit taller. "I just watched Asher tranq this guy in the middle of a crowd of people, and the cops turned their heads the other way. Then I come in here, maybe hoping to get some kind of idea about what the hell is goin' on because you don't tell me a goddamn thing anymore! And-"

"Don't raise your voice at me, kid. And watch your mouth. I won't hesitate to wash that filth out your trap."

Harley's mouth hangs open for a moment, unsure how to continue his fueled rant, and Tony takes that opportunity to grab him by the back of his shirt and haul him away. He pushes him into the elevator and grumbles to himself the entire ride up to the main floor. Harley remains silent, thank god, because Tony doesn't know how much more blatant rudeness he could take from this kid before he does or says something he might regret.

But then the kid opens his stupid mouth...

"Why don't you tell me anything anymore?"

Tony gives him a look. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Don't play dense," Harley scowls, angry gaze being redirected at the elevator doors. "I know what you've been doing. I'm not stupid."

Tony glances at the kid, then back at the ascending numbers displayed above the doors. They were

quickly approaching the main floor. So, he reaches out and smacks the red button beneath the columns of buttons and the elevator jarrs to a sudden stop. Tony turns to look at Harley again.

“Enlighten me.”

He sees the way Harley’s face screws up in consternation. “Well, I mean... ever since you started thinking of me as-as... as not just some random kid off the street, you’ve started, like-- I don’t know-- not telling me stuff.”

Maybe he’s actually dense... but Tony’s really not getting it. What in the world was the kid talking about? He told him stuff all the time.

Harley must notice his confusion so he tries to elaborate in that nonsensical way of his that Tony has an even harder time deciphering.

“It’s just before... when you weren’t scared of me getting hurt and whatever, you’d explain everything to me. How you worked and why you did certain things, and-and stuff that isn’t super important but at the same time really is important because it’s, like, the whole base for understanding who you are and what you do, and how you expect others to be. And-and *now* all we do now is-is go fishing in a dumb lake and look at stars like we’re pretending to be these normal people when we’re not! And I get that you want Peter to have a normal childhood because he’s still a kid and he’s got a chance to maybe turn out a little normal. But it’s too late for me! This is my life and this is all I know, but you keep leaving me in the dark about stuff and-and I don’t know what to do with myself. You just expect me to follow you willy-nilly and listen to whatever you tell me without a explanation. Like, for instance, when I asked you this morning if I could’ve just come with you here, you just said “no”, you coulda just told me that you had some killing stuff to get done today and I mighta not been in such a pissy mood about it, cuz, okay, I kinda get that! I don’t have to be sheltered like Peter! I’m not oblivious to what goes on around me. I-I’m supposed to be your kid now, y’know! Aren’t you supposed to be teaching me and training me to learn more about the business so I can *help* ? Isn’t that the way this works? Hell, you haven’t even let me touch a single weapon unless it’s nearly the end of the world! I’m not this fragile little toddler and I’m sick of you not including me in anything. No one respects me because they know that you don’t respect me either!”

Tony stares, a bit taken aback by the kid’s long-winded outburst, but then he frowns. “Now hang on a damn second.”

“No! Just tell me why you killed that man and stop pretendin’ like nothing’s going on!”

“That is none of your concern,” Tony responds coldly.

“It is when I can assume you just killed an innocent man without cause, because you won’t give me a goddamn reason!”

“Do you not know who I am?!” Tony roars. “Do you have no goddamn sense in that thick head of yours? In case you didn’t know, I kill people for a living, kid! Sometimes there are good reasons, and sometimes there are not. If your this bothered by the prospect of me killing a potentially innocent man then that only proves my point with not letting you anywhere near this!” He slams his hand back on the red button. “This discussion is over.”

“No it isn’t,” Harley growls, reaching over to hit the same button. “Do you just kill people now when they don’t agree with you? Does it really upset you that much when people accuse you of what you really are... a power hungry tyrant?”

Tony grits his teeth, using his pointer finger to jab the button once more, spurring the elevator back to life. “Watch it kid.”

“Is what he was saying true? Is that why you won’t tell me the truth? Because you know I’d realize you aren’t really all that great a person you’ve told me you are? Or maybe you really are Hydra, just like everyone’s saying, and you’ve just been building this friendly facade so people will side with you when you decide to step up and take over things without a fight. I’ll admit, that’s pretty crafty--”

Tony’s anger peaked and he cut the kid off with a harsh enough shove to throw him against the wall, and goddammit that’s exactly what he had been trying to avoid. But his blood was already boiling with the pent up fury he’d been trying to repress and a wave of bitterness has already swept across his face. Harley stumbles back, slamming into the elevator wall with a loud bang and he looks up at Tony, eyes flaring with panic. Tony hates seeing it on the kid’s face, but at the same time his instinctual drive revels in it.

He towers over him, one hand braced against the wall he had fallen into, crowding into his space and growling in his face. “Don’t you *ever* accuse me of such things again, you hear me?!”

But then the wild terror in Harley’s face quickly morphs into a similar level of rage and the boy is shoving him away with more strength than Tony could have expected.

“What because they’re true?! That’s what tends to piss you off isn’t it?! And I betcha you’re just itchin’ to snap my neck just like that other guy, but you know you *can’t*.” Harley snarls at him and stands taller. “Because as soon as people find out what you did to your own son, you’d lose everything. And you can’t risk that, can you?” Harley looks at him dead in the eye, and Tony sees a flicker of manic glee flash across the kid’s face, and he finds the look settling heavy in his stomach. “And you can’t stand it because for once you’re not the one with the upper hand.”

And just like that, their conversation stops, because the elevator doors are opening and a small group is waiting in front of the doors expectantly.

Natasha was at the front and she gave Tony a look. He wouldn’t be surprised if half the compound was able to hear their argument. But thankfully, Natasha pointedly ignored the tension in between them and offered a knowing smirk as she spoke. “We were just about to come look for you, Stark. We’ve found a solution.”

Tony keeps his lips in a firm line and his hand dives into his pocket to pull out his red-tinted shades. He slides them over his nose with a quick sniff and dismisses them with a quick wave. “I’ll be back with you in a second. I have to make sure this one gets back home.” He places his hand on Harley’s shoulder to lead him past the group, but with one strong shake of the shoulder, the kid was able to shove his hand off, and he twisted his neck back to give Tony an angry scowl before storming ahead of him.

Tony sneers and he can notice a few of the older men’s disapproving frowns as they watch the kid storm away. He curses the kid under his breath for making a scene and hurries after him, hoping to somewhat rectify the situation before he’s labeled as a submissive father who lets his children walk all over him, and he can’t have that.

He grabs the kid’s shoulder once more, but it isn’t a loose grip like it had been last time. It was hard and it probably hurt, but Tony needed to get his point across as he pulled the kid back to his side, lifting his gaze to watch for any other prying eyes as he lowered his head and voice to whisper so only Harley could hear.

“Don’t make a scene. It’ll look bad on both of us. You want respect, this is how you get it. Discretion is your best friend.” He can feel Harley stiffen under his hand, and he knows the kid is mulling it over. But he doesn’t pull away or throw another tantrum, so Tony takes it as something close to agreement.

He guides the kid outside, and into a car already waiting to drive him back to the house. The frown is back on the kid’s face, and Tony wished he wasn’t so angry so he might have a chance at making things better. But he’s angry, and he tends to turn into a prick when he’s angry. So, he leans one arm against the top of the open car door, and the other on the roof as he bends at the waist to whisper one last thing to make sure the kid understands.

“Things obviously aren’t working out the way things have been going. We’re gonna have to figure out how to fix this attitude of yours. So, wither fix it yourself and earn my trust and the privilege to work at my side, or I’ll find a way to fix it myself.” Then he closes the door and slaps the roof of the car.

Harley refuses to cry on the ride home. He’s angry and frustrated, not only at Tony, but at himself too. All he wanted to do was figure out what was going on, and maybe get Tony’s attention, but he definitely blew it. There’s no way Tony will be sharing anything worthwhile anytime soon. He definitely got Tony’s attention... just not exactly the attention the kind he was hoping to get.

God, he needed to learn how to control his temper. Because he’s pretty sure if Tony was anything like his dad, he would have lost a couple limbs by now, surely.

He’d been so good about it too. Tony and him have been getting along and it’s been great. They do all these fun things together and he’s just been so happy... he just doesn’t understand why he has to go and ruin it just when things were starting to get good. This is what he does every time and he hates it! If the man didn’t have doubts about him being his son before, then he definitely does now.

He sulks in the backseat, and stares out the window, ignoring whatever it was Clint was trying to lecture him about as he drove him home. His face feels hot and he knows his eyes must be glossy, because the pressure behind his eyes was growing as his anger slowly tapered off into worry.

So, by the time they parked in the driveway, he bee-lined for the house to avoid Clint, frantically brushing away the tears that had fallen as he scrambled onto the front porch and threw open the front door. He just wanted to go up to his room, hide under his covers, and cry it out until there were no more tears for him to shed, because god he didn’t want to cry in front of Tony again when the man came home to confront him because he *knows* Tony will. The man wasn’t just gonna let go of those terrible things Harley said to him. Sure, Tony had been a bit of an unneeded jerk and he wasn’t listening, but god Harley was such an idiot for mouthing off like that to Tony Stark.

But before he could hightail it on up to his room, Pepper intercepted him as he tried to slip through the living room and into the hall, calling out from the couch where she and Peter were cuddled up watching a movie, wearing flour-full aprons.

“Harley, Honey, you’re home early. I thought Tony was supposed to pick you up from Dom and Emilia’s on his way home from work.”

Harley scowled, doing his best to rush past her before she spotted his blotched cheeks and asked him what was wrong because god she was such a *mom* and he just wanted to be left alone for once! He didn’t want to talk about his feelings because he was supposed to be tough and strong! And, god, he bets Tony never cries like this...

“Yeah well obviously the plans have changed.” He snapped.

Pepper gave him a look... and it was a look Harley had never seen directed at anyone else but Tony before. Her eyes narrowed into a piercing stare. “Hon, let’s drop the attitude, okay? Just tell me what happened.”

Harley can feel the dam beginning to crack and he purses his lips... he didn’t want to be rude to Pepper, but *still!* She can’t possibly understand how he’s feeling. If anything she’d probably take Tony’s side and he just can’t handle that right now!

“Nothing happened! Just leave me alone.” He could feel his irritation peaking again as he made another move to his room, but again, Pepper stopped him. She must have picked up on his distress because her frustrated glare softened into a worried frown.

“Do you maybe want to watch a movie with me and Peter? And then we can talk about it when you feel better—“

“Just leave me alone!” Harley screamed, face red as the struggle to contain his tears became even more difficult. “Stop nosing into my goddamn business! I can take care of myself. I don’t need you to baby me, *Pepper*.” He spat out her name with a growl.

“Hey!” Peter stood on the couch, face hardening with narrowed eyes and a threatening scowl as he stepped over Peppers lap to put himself between them. His shoulders squared and Harley could see his tiny fists squeeze into fists as he spoke with a commanding growl. “You leave Mama ‘lone!”

Harley pauses and stares. Peter has never made that face, and his voice has never sounded so authoritative. It made Harley feel even more insecure that he felt threatened and put down by a friggin four year old. He shouldn’t be scared of a *four* year old! So he stood taller and growled back... if he couldn’t stand up to his own goddamn little brother and demand his respect how was he ever supposed to do the same with grown men.

“You stay out of this Peter.” He poked a finger into the little boy's chest, making him stumble back a ways, but Peter didn’t stand down. “Sit your ass down and shut your mouth—“

“Harley!” And now Pepper was standing, tall and threatening as she glowered down at him, hands placed firmly on her hips. “I don’t want to ever hear you speak that way to me or Peter again, do you understand me?”

Harley sneered at her. “Oh yeah, I forgot. He’s the favorite. I can’t go off hurting the golden child’s feelings. Y’know, I betcha you don’t even love me. Just some pity project Tony brought in to keep you busy while he had you locked up in that stupid penthouse—“

It happened before he had time to blink. Next thing he knows, his head snapped to the side and his right cheek stung. His hand lifted instinctively to cradle his cheek and he looked up at Pepper with wide eyes.

She *slapped* him

He wasn’t sure what to feel.... but when he saw the look on her face he’s pretty sure she didn’t know what to feel either. She stared back at him with big eyes and her mouth parted open slightly.

“I- um...” she started before trailing off. Then she looked down at the floor and lifted a shaky hand to cover her eyes. “I think you should go up to your room now, Harley.”

Harley couldn’t find it in himself to move. He’s shocked. Out of all the things he expected Pepper

to do to him, he had never expected *that* .

He rubbed his cheek... it's not like it *hurt* anything more than his ego. He glanced at Peter, expecting to find him scared and mad, just like he had been at Tony, but his tiny arms remained crossed over his chest and his mouth remained downturned into a scowl. And Harley felt like nothing more than a jerk for driving Pepper to the point of hitting him. And he can't be sure if that slap signified him finally crossing the line or what... but Pepper had been the one to convince Tony to take him in... she's probably the only reason Tony ever looked further into his framed betrayal. She's always had faith in him and loved him... and now he blew it. With Tony *and* her.

He felt the dam break and a couple tears slipped through... he's messed up big time.

Then Pepper looked back up at him, looking more sad than mad now. And her hand lifted to cover her mouth as she spoke. "Go to your room Harley. Your father will deal with you when he gets home."

He doesn't bother to correct her and he rushes off to his room. Despite it being exactly what he had wanted... he couldn't help but feel devastated.

By the time Tony got home, it was already dark. He'd been busy all evening finishing off his work with his executive team and then later, talking with Domencio about why in the world Harley had shown up at the compound unannounced. What he'd been told made him feel even more guilty about the way he treated the kid... all the boy wanted to do was talk to him. He'd been feeling excluded and unfit to be a Stark. Or at least that's what Domencio had told him.

Although, the child had absolutely no right to talk to him the way he did no matter what way he was feeling, so Tony felt somewhat justified with himself.

Still, he missed dinner... and Pepper was probably gonna be a bit upset with him, but he has a feeling he could weasel his way out of it, especially considering the surprise he brought home. And he's hoping Harley had cooled himself down a bit so Tony can dish out the punishment and the lecture he's been refining all day, and then can come out and enjoy the surprise. Heck, he was exhausted, but he was more excited to see the looks on their faces; especially Peter's.

He sets it up on the porch and then combs a hand through his hair as he yawns, wide and loud, before opening the door and peeling off his jacket.

"Daddy!" He smiles when the small body slams straight into his legs and he bends down to lift the boy into his arms with a soft grun and gives the boy a chaste kiss on his cheek.

"Hey Bubba," He greets.

Peter smiles and hugs him tight around the neck. "I misst you so bad."

Tony chuckles. "Oh yeah. Well I think I mighta missed you more." He glances around the house, expecting Pepper to come rushing around the corner and scold him for missing their family dinner without calling ahead first, but she's nowhere to be found. "Where's Mama, Bubba?"

Peter squirms in his arms to be let down and Tony does so, and the boy grabs his hand to lead him into the kitchen as he explains. "Har'ley was so bad and gots in big t'ouble with Mama. Then Mana gots real sad. She says she okay, but I knows she not, so look!" He throws his arms at the mess he'd made of the kitchen. "I cleant the dishes cuz Ha'ley didn'. An-an I makin' her snack! I was so self sushifiscent Daddy, wasn' I?" Peter beamed up at him, gazing proudly upon his work.

And, well... at least he tried... A dining chair was pulled up to the sink, water and soap was puddled in the floor and the “clean” dishes were covered in soap and and stacked precariously on the edge of the counter. And then there was a plate on the floor, globs of peanut butter plopped on top and a half poured glass of milk beside it. The milk open milk carton sat on the floor beside it, in the middle of a big puddle of milk that had been spilled on the floor.

Tony would’ve probably been a bit more amused and endeared by the thought and effort Peter had made, because penutbutter was currently Pepper’s most favorite craving, but he was much more distracted by what he had said about Harley and Pepper...

“Where’s Mama Pete?”

“Her and Miss ‘Lena in the room.”

He rushed to his room and sent Elena out to take care of Peter and clean up his mess, and maybe rewash the dishes because, well, Peter’s *four* .

And he finds Pepper crying, laying on her side with her face in her hands. So, Tony sits on the mattress beside her, one hand settling on her waist and the other reaching up to stroke her hair. “Baby what’s wrong? What’d he say?” Tony feels himself getting angry. Harley made her cry... that child better be happy he doesn’t believe in corporal punishment because he’d make sure that boy wouldn’t be able to sit for weeks!

“I’ll go beat his ass right now if you need me to. What’d he say to you?”

“Tony I’m so sorry!” She sobs, reaching for his hand and squeezing it to her chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shh, shh baby, it’s okay. Just tell me what happened.” He hopes it’s just the hormones making a bigger deal than it should be, because god nothing ever makes Pepper cry like this. And he doesn’t know if he’ll be able to contain himself if he finds out Harley had hurt her in some way. Because *that* is crossing a line

“No, I-I *hurt* him, Tony,”

“ *What* ?”

Pepper sat up and wiped away her tears, looking him in the eyes.

“I hit him, Tony,” she whispered, “I-I shouldn’t have, I know you don’t agree with doing that and I don’t either, but he just—“ she growled in frustration, “he just said something and it made me so upset and I—“

“What’d he say?” Tony interrupted.

Pepper gave him a look. “Tony, I *hit* him,” she said it as if Tony didn’t understand it the first time. “It doesn’t matter what he said, I shouldn’t have done that.”

Tony shrugs it off. “Maybe not, but you wouldn’t have done it without a reason. So what did he say to you? He was already a dick to me earlier; he’s already getting punished. Don’t protect him. Tell me what he said to you.”

Pepper wipes away the rest of her tears and takes a deep breath to gain her composure. “He um... he came rushing in and I just asked him why he was so early and he said something smart to me... I could tell he was upset about something so I tried to stay calm but he just went off at me. I’m sure he was just upset about whatever happened with you, Tony.” She pursed her lips together and Tony

narrowed his eyes at her.

“What aren’t you telling me? Don’t hide anything from me Pepper.”

“Well,” Pepper started slowly, “Peter was with me and he stood up to Harley and Harley didn’t like that. He yelled at Peter and shoved him, so that’s when I stood up and got stern with him, because I don’t care how upset he is. We can’t have him talking to us or his siblings that way.” She swallowed, and looked down at her lap.

Tony frowned.

Another tear fell and she quickly wiped it away. “He said um... He said Peter is the favorite and that he’s not loved. He thinks we pity him and that’s why we keep him around... Tony? Have we... have we not shown him how much we care about him? Is this our fault? I-I just thought he wanted to be left alone, so I try not to-to push him, but maybe we should have!” She begins tearing up again, hand lifting to her mouth once more and Tony shushes her, pulling her forward to cradle her head to his chest.

“He probably hates me. After he told me how he feels and I just *slap* him. Why would I do that? He’s-he’s... I know he’s sensitive to that kind of treatment and he should be because of all the shit he’s been through. I just can’t believe I did that.” She cried harder. “I’m a terrible mother!”

Tony pets her hair. “No you’re not Darling. I’m sure he doesn’t hate you. It was just a little smack.”

“It’s the *principal* of the matter Tony,” Pepper scolds through her tears.

“Alright, alright,” Tony relents.

Pepper pushes away from him and swipes her fingers beneath her eyes to clear away the tears. “Can you go talk to him? I just—“ she pauses and frowns, “I know he’s mad at me.”

Tony cracks a small smile, easing her gently back against the bed. “I’ll talk to him, but I’m sure he’s not upset with you. If anything, he’s probably beating himself up about it and organizing his getaway again.”

“Tony that’s even worse!”

Tony chuckled and kissed her head. “I’m just kidding.”

Pepper scowls at him.

“Alright, I’m going.”

So he goes, encircled in both anger and worry. He ascends the spiraling stairs and ducks his head into Harley’s room. He finds the boy curled in his chair beside the big window. Chin propped up against his knees as he stared out at the night sky and the darkness casing the fields.

Tony frowns. He’s not exactly happy to see the kid, but he’s definitely not as upset as he was hours ago. Don’t get him wrong, he’s still pissed as hell, especially after finding out he made Pepper cry, but the lonesome, forlorn look on the child’s face makes him pause for a short moment.

“Kid,” he starts with, taking his first step into the room. Harley jumps at his voice and his head whips around to stare at him, expression instantly melting into dread. “I think we need to talk.”

“I-I-I’m sorry!” Harley immediately stuttered. “Whatever Pepper said happened, I’m sorry!”

“I don’t think sorry’s gonna cut it this time, kid.” Tony sighs, despondently.

Harley scrambles out of the chair and rushes to press against the wall, putting the chair between him and Tony. “I-I didn’t mean to make her upset, I swear!”

Tony quirks a brow at him. “Oh, so you *meant* to make *me* upset, then?”

Harley’s lips pressed together. “I-I-I always make you upset,” he whispered under his breath, casting his gaze to the side, “it’s nothing new, really.”

“Ahh,” Tony nods and sits against the edge of the kid’s bed, frown never leaving his face. He wasn’t gonna ease the kid with a smile quite yet. “Well I think it’s about time we fix that, don’t you think?” His voice remains low and intimidating.

Harley grimaces, and shrinks closer to the wall.

“We’ve been letting you get away with quite a bit, kid, but it needs to stop tonight.”

The kid still doesn’t say anything and Tony’s frown deepens.

“Quit cowering in the corner like I’m gonna rip your arm off.”

Harley slowly steps away from the wall. “Well I couldn’t be sure, yknow,” he frowns, “I did make Pepper cry...”

“Oh trust me,” Tony nods, “you better be glad I gave myself time to cool down before coming home. I don’t know what I would’ve done to you,” he scowls. “I usually have plenty of self control, but you kid...” he shakes his head, “you have a talent of pissing me the hell off.”

The corner of Harley’s mouth quirks up.

“Don’t take that as a compliment.”

His mouth immediately quirked back down.

“Now, here’s what’s gonna happen. I’m gonna talk and you’re gonna listen, alright?”

Harley nods.

“I talked to Domencio. He told me why he brought you to HQ. And I’m sorry that you’ve been feeling left out and a little overwhelmed with this whole ‘being a Stark’ thing’. I was overwhelmed by it as a kid too-- constantly-- and I didn’t want that for you or Peter. I guess that’s why I’ve been so hesitant about pushing to integrate you into my world. I know it’s a bit late to try keeping you in the dark about things. You’ve already got experience with this stuff, as you said earlier, but there’s still a lot you need to learn and experience. And I honestly don’t think you’re ready for that yet. Those things you have to learn aren’t going to be easy and that’s the *reason* I don’t hire kids... it’s draining, to your body and especially to your mind and you don’t need that kind of stress right now. I know you think it’s all fun and games, and it’ll make you look cool, but this is a dangerous world and I’m doing my very best to protect you from it. And you’re making it damn difficult.” He gives Harley a look, and the kid at least had the decency to look away in shame. “I’m not trying to be a dick. I’m just looking out for you.”

“I know,” Harley whispers, “I just... I just wanna help.”

“And you will one day,” Tony nods, “you’ll be a big help to me. I can already tell and I can’t wait

to see that day come. I can see big things in your future kiddo, but not right now,” he pauses for a moment, and let’s that sink in. “So, that being said, I don’t expect you to be the perfect Stark heir right now. I don’t expect you to be some hardass, no nonsense leader because you’re just a kid, as much as you might try to deny it. So, there’s no need for you to prove yourself to me or anyone else and try to be some fearless superior right now—“

“But when you were my age, you were already—“ Harley tries to interrupt, but Tony cuts him off with a stern glare and snap of his fingers.

“Nope. We are not going to set my traumatic childhood and my father’s poor parenting as a precedent. If anything, my childhood gives me even more reason to avoid molding you into my successor right now.”

Harley makes a move to protest again, but Tony holds up a finger.

“But! I understand that the transition from full time mafia call-boy surrounded by crime and murder to a normal, sheltered, child surrounded by family and stability may be difficult. So... I’m gonna do my best to compromise with you, deal?”

Harley nods eagerly.

“In fact that’s actually going to be part of your punishment.”

Harley frowns in confusion and cocks his head.

“I was originally only going to have you do it for one week, but after that whole thing with Pepper, I’m gonna make it two weeks... you’re going to be coming into work with me every day—“

Harley grins.

“Nu-uh I’m not finished. Don’t start grinning. You’re going to come in and help the minor staff. Particularly the cleaning staff and the cooking staff.”

“What?! I don’t get to do cool stuff? I thought you said we were gonna compromise.”

“Well that wouldn’t be much of a punishment would it? But I’m thinking that after your punishment is over... if you still want to get involved, you can start at the bottom of the food chain as a new recruit and work your way up the ladder to help ease you into things... but we’re keeping the no weapons rule, and if I happen to decide to let you train, it will be private like it was with Happy.”

Harley doesn’t look ecstatic about it but he nods nonetheless.

“It’ll give you some work ethic, and as much as you might think otherwise, you will earn much more respect working your way from the bottom to the top, instead of having everything handed to you on a silver platter. That being said, if you’re going to start working for me you’re going to treat me the right way, you here? I don’t want any more of this mouthing off. I don’t put up with that. I know you’ve gotten comfortable with me, but that does not give you the right to say the things you said to me. I am your superior and whether you like it or not, I am your father now, so if anything I will deserve even more respect from you than anyone else.”

“I understand, sir.” Harley bows his head in shame

“Good. And if I *ever* catch wind of you disrespecting your mother like that again, you will wish I’d kick your ass instead, do you understand?”

Harley nods frantically.

“And the same goes with Peter. We don’t disrespect each other in this family and we never will. We’re all a team. Got that?”

Harley nods again.

“Great. Now that that’s out the way, we can talk a little bit about what you said to your mother earlier.” Harley’s face falls, and he finds himself backing towards the wall once more. He had probably thought the discussion was over. But Tony continues anyway, despite the obvious discomfort that came with this subject.

“You do understand that what you said couldn’t be further from the truth?”

Harley’s mouth falls open to say something. It moves in tandem with unspoken words that must have been stuck in his throat, because he doesn’t speak a word. Instead, he turns his head away and looks down at his socked feet.

“Kid, c’mon,” Tony sighs, rubbing his forehead, “we’ve talked about this.”

“Well I’m sorry if my insecure ass is inconveniencing you,” Harley snapped venomously.

Tony scowled. “What have I said about watching your mouth, kid?”

Harley’s head whips up and he glares. His mouth opens, preparing for what Tony assumes will be another smartass remark, but his mouth quickly snaps back closed as he rethinks the words, because, well, that didn’t end so well for him last time.

“Smart boy,” Tony praises, imperiously. “Now, I guess this is just something we need to work at a little more, and I’m sorry if me or your mother tend to give Peter a bit more attention--”

“I don’t need to be babied,” Harley immediately interjects, “I’m fine.”

“You’re obviously *not*, kid,” Tony argued. “I think it’s a legit thing that kid’s tend to start acting out to get attention from their parents. And I don’t know about you, but I feel like this is a bit too much of a coincidence, don’t you think?”

Harley’s face heats up and he bows his head again.

“That’s what I thought... As I was saying though... just because we tend to coddle Peter a little more than you doesn’t mean we don’t care about you, kid. We’re just trying to respect your space, and-and I know we don’t have the most open and honest relationship on the planet and that’s half my fault, I’m sorry. I’m new to this whole hugging and lovey-dovey Dad-ing thing--”

“You seem to be a natural at it with Peter,” Harley mumbles under his breath, making Tony pause.

“Are you--” his brows furrowed in worry, “Kid, are you upset that I’m more affectionate with Peter? Because I thought-- I thought you-you were... that you didn’t like... that...” He fumbles awkwardly with his words, which only makes the entire situation all the more uncomfortable and Harley’s cheeks flare wildly.

“No-no-no that’s--um, I didn’t mean...”

“Well, I-If that’s something you’d like...” Tony trails off, making an odd expression with his face, “I-I um... it’s just Peter’s a bit more insistent and dependent on-on... y’know... all that, and-and

you... you tend to not--”

“No, I-I know, an-and I-I-- that’s not what I was trying to say! I’m older and more mature, I um... I don’t need the same attention Peter does, *obviously* . I-I didn’t mean it like that...”

Tony chews his bottom lip and gives the kid a look. There’s a few seconds of awkward silence before Tony breaks it with a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry Harley.”

And then Harley looks up at him with wide eyes, because the man *never* calls him by his first name.

“Maybe I’ve been reading your signals wrong this whole time...” they lock eyes for a moment, “I shoulda picked up on it right off the bat. Hell, you’re exactly like me when I was your age, strong, determined, and desperate for attention...”

“I’m not desperate--”

Tony fixes him with a look, which immediately shuts him up.

“I-I know it’s awkward, especially between us, believe me, because we’re both incompetent idiots when it comes to this kind of stuff. I’ve never been good with showing affection, and the only reason I can do it so easily with Peter is because there’s no need for me to put myself out there. Peter does all the work for the both of us... It’s something he needs and-and insists on, so that’s not me showing favoritism, kid.” He pauses, and turns his head to look at the wall. “And I know it may be hard to believe, but I’m an insecure little bitch sometimes too, kiddo. And I always told myself that if I ever grew up and had kids of my own I’d be sure they never had to feel the same way I did when it came to... this kind of stuff.” He waves his hands awkwardly between the two of them. “So, for my own peace of mind... just tell me what you want so I don’t have to overthink every interaction I have with you. If you don’t care for the hugs or-or the *other* stuff that’s perfectly fine, but if you *do* want that... you have to tell me or I... or we may never be able to get past this.”

“I-I-I don’t know what I want,” Harley whispers, staring at Tony with wide eyes, desperate for him to understand without actually having to speak the words. And he does know what he wants, Tony can tell...

“It’s not shameful to want hugs kid... do you think any less of Peter, or Pepper, or Thor, even, just because they love hugs?”

Harley shakes his head. “Then you shouldn’t be either... It’s natural for kids to appreciate a little bit of affection here and there. It’s good for them too, or so I’ve heard. All I’m asking is for you to meet me in the middle here kid... I’m not the best at social cues, so if you want a hug you just have to tell me, or don’t even bother telling me, I don’t care.”

Harley cracks a small smile. “Even if it’s in front of all your friends?”

Tony smirks. “Of course. I’m not ashamed to hug my son. I’m not my father... I mean, I would appreciate you not constantly clinging to me like Peter would while I’m working, but I got a feeling I won’t have to worry about that.”

Harley smiled, and then they’re both immersed in silence once more as Tony lets that sink in. “I um... I don’t think I need it as much as Peter does, but... if you want to, like, hug me or something every once in a while, like, yeah... then I wouldn’t mind it all too much.”

Tony grins, smugly as he stands from his seat on the bed. “So you’re whole thing about not

wanting attention or being tucked in? I should just ignore that now?"

Harley's face heats up as Tony approaches him, and the man laughs. "Just messin' with ya kid. But hopefully this little deal we've made will help us communicate a little better so we can avoid our little screaming matches in the future, yeah?"

He wraps an arm around Harley's shoulder as the boy nods and he begins leading him towards the door, but Harley stops abruptly before they reach the top of the stairs and he looks up at Tony with a worried expression on his face.

"Does Pepper hate me now?"

"Oh goodness no, she thinks you're the one who hates her."

Harley's brows immediately furrow. "Of course not!"

"See, that's what I told her, but she thinks I'm an incompetent idiot, so y'know."

Harley snickers.

"Alright, alright, cool it. All she'll want probably is a hug, so..." Tony gives him a small smile. "Let's go down and you can tell your mother you don't hate her, and that we've fixed our issues."

Harley smiles just a bit. "And I can apologize," he corrects, looking up at Tony.

"Exactly."

Pepper and Peter are sitting together on the couch waiting for Harley and Tony to come downstairs after their talk. Peter jabbars happily about all the things he was hoping to do with Domencio tomorrow when the man took him out for the day, and Pepper tried her best to pay attention, but she was much more worried about the two boys upstairs and how things were turning out. They'd been talking for a good half hour and she didn't want to have to deal with another family squabble so soon.

So, when they came down, Tony's arm slung around Harley's shoulder, both smiling, she felt a weight lift off her chest and she breathed a sigh of relief. She stood from the couch, tears catching in her eyes and she rushed towards Harley to wrap him in a big hug.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I would never mean to hurt you like that, I'm sorry." She kisses his forehead and squeezes him tight. "And don't you ever say anything like that again, understand? I never want you to ever think those things are true." She's stern about it, but not too stern and Harley hugs her back, stating his own apology.

So, once everyone has kissed and made up, including Harley and Peter, Tony herds them towards the front door to see the surprise he'd left on the front porch, and, well, it went over quite well if he could say so himself.

Peter hadn't known what it was until Harley gasped and shouted, "a telescope?!" And that was when chaos let loose and Peter started freaking out, being his hyperactive self and sprinting out towards their usual spot on the lawn, then back to the porch to hug Tony tightly around the legs, then back out into the lawn jumping and hollering in excitement. Harley follows after him, his smile just a bit brighter than Tony's seen from him in a while, which makes him grin in return. Pepper gives him a long kiss as thank you, and he would have been happy if it lasted a lot longer, but Peter was already shouting at them to hurry up. And since he's a pushover he shouldered the

telescope, took his wife's hand and marched out towards their sons.

They set it up, and Peter insisted on trying to figure out how to work it himself when Tony tried helping, so he chuckled and put up his hands, going back to lay down on the blanket with his wife.

He and Pepper cuddled up on the blanket as the kid's played around trying to figure out the telescope a couple yards ahead of them. Pepper's head was pillowed on his arm, and Tony's hand twisted to stroke her belly gently, humming to himself in contentment as the two enjoyed the soft bickering from the pair of brothers.

"How'd we get so lucky, huh?" Pepper whispered, watching their two boys through glassy eyes.

Tony smiled to himself and gave his shoulders a small shrug. "It must be fate," he whispered back with a teasing smile.

Pepper laughed, a cute and soft giggle that made his heart soar. "How do you suppose that?"

"Well it'd be a pretty damn good coincidence if it wasn't... this is the exact thing I've wished for ever since I was a kid."

"Really?"

He nods. "Yep... every chance I got... the only thing my mother couldn't give me for Christmas...." He turns to look at her, a soft smile playing at his lips. "It's by far, much better than I ever expected it to be."

She smiles at him, and then he leans forward to peck her on the lips, then again and again, and he gets so caught up in the feel of her against him, that he completely forgot about the kids until Peter yelled out for him in frustration.

"Daddy!" He shouts, stomping his foot and pouting, arms crossed over his chest. "It's not working! I can't see nothin'!"

Pepper chuckles against his lips and Tony releases an amused, yet exasperated sigh. "Well, duty calls, I guess."

He stands with a soft grunt and helps them out. And he spends the next hour glued to the chair in front of the telescope that Harley had gone to fetch. He showed them the planets, and the moon, and they even spotted a couple more shooting stars.

Harley went to curl up beside Pepper after half an hour and quickly fell asleep, exhausted from the emotional draining day, but Peter... Peter and his insatiable thirst to learn and explore kept Tony seated right there, with his son on his lap, watching his cute, puckered face as he did his best to concentrate as he peered through the lens.

And, yeah, he can't help but wonder how he ever got this lucky. He never deserved this, and he could live the rest of his life trying to be worthy of this little boy, but he would most surely fail.

"Daddy!"

The panicked cry was sudden and loud and it jarred him awake from his blissful sleep and throttling him into a fit of panic. He'd been woken by Peter's cries before, but it felt different. His head throbbed, and there was a sharp ringing in his ears as if the kid had hollered right in his ear... but he hadn't. He sounded so close, but the kid was nowhere to be found.

The aftereffects of the shriek resonated and echoed in the room until it tapered out into a soft whisper. He sucked in a harsh breath of air and whipped his head around in search of the echoing voice. His heart hammered and a thickness was forming in his throat as his worry quickly grew into a debilitating panic when he couldn't find the source.

“DADDY!”

A pained screech followed the desperate cry this time and Tony's head whipped behind him in search of the sudden voice, and then he lurched forward off of whatever it was he had been perched on as if he were going to charge at the wall. He was barely on his feet for a second before his legs gave out and he collapsed onto the smooth tile floor beneath him. The breath gets knocked out of him as he tumbles into a heap on the ground, wheezing and gasping to get air into his struggling lungs.

His body writhed in a desperate need to stand and go find Peter. He needed to get to Peter. Peter needed him.

“Tony? Tony! Tony Please!”

His breath hitches... that was Harley.

Why was Harley here too?

*The echoing of the screams and the begging continues as he struggles to scramble to his feet, gasps for air becoming more frequent and he turns in all directions, hoping to find some hint as to where these voices were coming from, or how he can get out of here to find them. **Were they real? Were they hurt?** That doesn't matter... he just needs to get to find them and get them out of wherever the hell they are.*

His search ends up being a useless endeavor because there's absolutely nothing. He surveys the room to find nothing more than white walls on white tile. Whatever it was he had been perched on before had vanished and he was alone, trapped in this room as the cries of his children continued which were now overlapping each other so the echoing became nothing more than a mind numbing string of sobs and screams indistinguishable from one another. He turned again, more frantic. Then again, and again. There was no way out. No door, no window, no ceiling tiles or air vents... there was only the constant echo of screams bouncing off the far too white walls.

“DAAADDDY!” The pained screech finishes with frantic sobs and Tony's entire body trembles with his drive-- no, his need-- to get to his son...

“TONY!”

No , his Sons.

*He stumbles forward, ramming his shoulder into the wall closest to him and banging his fists in a fruitless attempt to escape. He's being driven by a sweeping panic and that growling instinct in his chest to **protect protect protect** , and he's **failing** . He can't protect them and it's driving him mad. His breathing becomes labored, shoulder slamming into the wall once more.*

“Peter!!” He screams, ramming into the sturdy wall. “Harley! I'm coming!”

His shouts are followed by another piercing scream and he whirls around, eyes wild and red rimmed and pupils dilated with uncontrolled adrenaline. His entire body tremors with an itch to get out. His chest stuttering with shallow breaths and he's pretty sure he might be hyperventilating

but he really didn't give a shit!

"PETER!" He screams at the opposite wall, face red and veins pulsing against his skull. Spit flies from his mouth and his throat tightens to elicit a sharp series of chest heaving coughs and gags as he chokes on his own saliva. His ears ring with the constant echoes of screams swimming around his cell and now he can't breathe.

"Daddy. P'ease."

It's quieter now. Almost like a whisper and Tony falls to his knees, eyes glazed over with helpless fear. He sits back on his heels and bends his head to rest on his knees, desperate for this nightmare to end. The screams are still filtering through the room and it only seemed like they were getting louder. He squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath.

This couldn't be real.

But then he hears a voice that makes everything make a little more sense...

"Stark. Get up. Stop crying. I thought you were supposed to be tougher than this."

Tony looks up at the wall again, and this time he isn't met with a blinding white. There's a window now, and Richard Parker stands on the other side, but he's not alone...

He has Peter. He's holding Peter.

It doesn't really take a thought on his part, before Tony's face morphs into a scowl and he's charging towards the glass, banging his fists against the hard barrier between him and his son's captor. He bangs both fists on the glass and yells.

"You bitch! You're gonna pay for this. Let him go right now!" He can feel the heat emanating off his face, and he's not sure if it's tears or sweat, but his face feels damp and it's now way too hot in this room.

He sees Peter do nothing to fight against the man's hold on him. The boy's limp, head resting against the man's shoulder as he cried. Still, the cries and whines were amplified in his cell so he could hear nothing but the distress of his child, and the boy's begging for him.

"You have nothing Stark. I have the upper hand. I've had it the entire time..." A wicked smile spreads across his Richard Parker's face as he slowly sways back and forth, laying a hand on Peter's quivering back to gently stroke his back. "He never belonged to you. You knew that."

"Getchya FUCKIN' hand off him!" He banged on the glass again, but all that came of it was Peter's fearful cower.

"Daddy," he heard the soft whine clear as day as the sound reverberated around the room.

"It's okay baby, Daddy's here. I'ma get you outta here, okay?"

Peter doesn't react to his voice, not so much as a glance towards him.

"He can't hear you, Stark." Richard replies conversationally, and Tony's heart drops as he continues to stare at Peter's back to him.

"Tony!" That was Harley's voice again! Tony's head whips away from Richard and Peter, staring at the ceiling and every wall around him with searching eyes. Then the echoing begins again and

he doesn't know why he keeps looking when he knows he's not going to find him.

"Where is he?!" Tony turns back to Ricahrd, eyes darkening with anger. "Where's Harley?"

Richard doesn't answer. He just stands there on the other side of the glass with a neutral expression on his face, eyes glazed over as if... as if there was nobody there. An empty shell of a man... yet he continued to rock Peter back and forth to soothe him.

There's another scream that filters into the room and Tony involuntarily throws his fists and forearm against the glass once more, a thundering roar of anger.

"Where is he?!" He screams.

Richard doesn't answer. He doesn't even move

Instead, the floor shakes and thunder erupts as if the floor beneath him were about to split away. He stumbles... then he sees the lights behind Richard and Peter flicker as he falls to his knees. It was ominous and so, so cheesy as he watches a man emerge from the dark, face hidden by a well placed shadow except for his white teeth reflecting the light.

Tony swallows, throat already sore and he staggers to his feet once more despite the trembling floor beneath him. He spots movement coming from beside the dark figure and he squints his eyes, hand to his chest as he slowly draws his breath.

"Harley?"

Sure enough, Harley comes to light, hands scratching at the larger hand wrapped around his throat, belonging to the dark figure.

"Let go of him," Tony growls, back on his feet.

A familiar chuckle echoes through his chambers and his entire body seizes with instinctive terror. "Anthony, Anthony, Anthony," the voice chides. "I thought I taught you better than this."

And sure enough as the man steps into the light, he recognizes the face of his father, belonging to the hand wrapped around his son's neck.

"D-Dad?" Tony chokes out. He shakes his head helplessly. "Dad, don't--"

"Don't what?" Howard questions innocently. "How do you know what I'm going to do, son? How do you know that I'm going to punish you? Do something you don't like?" Tony doesn't answer so the man chooses to answer for him. "It's because you know you've done something wrong... I've spent your entire childhood teaching you exactly what you need to know to grow up strong and resilient like your ancestors, but you've failed me. Over, and over, and over again. You're soft-hearted Anthony, and I just hope this punishment will finally teach you your lesson."

Tony gulps, eyes already beginning to burn with unshed tears. He presses up against the glass once more. Not out of anger this time, but out of desperation.

"Dad, please, you don't understand. It's not their fault.

*"No, **you** don't understand Anthony," his father snapped, "I've told you, son, you cannot be weak. And this attachment you have to these children that don't even share our blood is downright sickening. It's softened you and molded you into a weak, pitiful, man, and I'm here to set it straight. You will not make the same mistake again, will you son?"*

Tony watches with wide eyes as Howard's hand tightens ever so slightly around Harley's throat. The boy gasps, grappling at the hand desperately. "Tony!" He pleads through his breathless gasps, kicking his legs wildly.

"Leave him alone," Tony whispers, but when his father doesn't listen and only squeezes tighter, Tony slams his fist against the glass. "I said leave him ALONE!"

A small smile splits across Howard's face, and he loosens his grip.

"Ah, so you've finally grown some courage, I see."

Tony's chest heaves, and he coughs at the strain. Then he spots movement to the left and Tony turns his head to find Richard slowly lowering Peter to the ground in front of him, but the man didn't say a word, instead his father speaks again.

"Since you seem so adamant for this one not to be harmed for your sins," Howard gestured towards Harley, "I'll use the smaller one instead."

Tony watches in horror as Richard slowly steps away from Peter and pulls out a gun from the waistband of his pants. Peter sobs, arms outstretched towards the glass separating them, completely oblivious to the danger lurking behind him. "Daddy," he pleaded, fat tears rolling his eyes, and Tony hopes the child can see him now so he knows he's not alone.

"No, don't. Please," he begs his father, staring at Peter, sucking in a short breath.

"Well you'll have to choose which to spare, son. I'll let you keep one of your pets, but two is too much of a distraction to you. And you need to learn your lesson.

Harley, having been released, stared between Peter and Tony, mouth open, hand wrapped around his own throat, and his eyes now red. "Tony, don't let 'em hurt 'im, please. Pick him. Protect him," the hand wraps around his throat once more and he croaks as he's lifted to his tippy toes.

"Don't make me pick between them, Dad, please," he begs, his voice now gruff with emotion as he looks between either boy. One with a gun to his head and the other with a hand around their throat.

"You have to choose, son, or you'll leave here with neither."

"Tony," Harley chokes, gasping for air and clawing at Howard's hand, "P'ter."

Tony feels his throat close up and a soft keen rises from his chest as he looks back at the little boy to find him sobbing into his knees, looking much like the time he first saw him.

"I can't--,"

"Look at this, children," Howard begins with a small smirk, "your father is hesitating to rescue you when he has the perfect opportunity."

Peter looks up at him through teary eyes. "Daddy?"

"Time's running out, Stark," Richard finally speaks, voice devoid of any emotion as he pulls back the hammer of his gun with a resounding click.

"Peter!" Tony shouts in a quick panic, "I choose Peter."

He only has a second to absorb the sadistic grin that spreads across his father's face before he's

speaking, low and threatening. "Good choice," he says, just before the loud bang of a gun rings out.

Tony screams. He can't hear so much as he feels it though. His throat is raw and he can't see anything except the blood slowly staining the front of Peter's shirt. And, god, the confusion on his face as he looks down at the stain, before looking back up at Tony with a sad, defeated expression before he slowly falls to the side. Eyes open and stain growing bigger against the adorable giraffe patterned pajama shirt he insisted on wearing that night.

*"Hear that, child?" Howard was speaking again and Tony was forced to listen to the booming voice echoing through his ears when all he wanted was to mourn his child in peace. Tears trailed down his cheeks and his breathing was labored. **Oh god, what had he done?** "He didn't even hesitate to pick your brother over you. He had said there was no difference in his love for either of you, so why did he choose to have you killed instead?"*

Tony looked over then to find Howard speaking to Harley. The boy's eyes were wide and wet with tears as he stared at the corpse of his brother laid in a pool of his own blood.

"I suppose the real question should be, did he ever even love you to begin with." And at that, Harley looked away from Peter's body. He turned his head to look up at Howard, lip quivering before turning back to Tony, betrayal engraved in his eyes as they bore into his soul. "Maybe he thought he did," Howard whispered softly, "but men like him, men like us, they can't love a child like you. A child who killed his own mother..."

"Don't listen to him, Harley," Tony choked through his tears, shaking his head desperately, "don't listen to a word he says, you understand?" He forces himself not to look at Peter... he can't... he'll lose it... and he needs to stay strong for Harley now... he needs to stay strong...

"I love you, okay? I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you."

Howard gave him a look, stony and irritated. "Did you learn nothing, Anthony?"

Tony swallowed hard, but he met his father's gaze with a fiery gaze of his own.

"I've told you, Anthony, attachment has no place in a strong man's heart. You should know this by now, son. If you had not cared for that child as much as you did, you would not be feeling this way right now, would you?" The familiar words echo in his head and Tony scowls.

"Fuck you, Dad."

Howard chuckles, then turns his attention back down to Harley. "Let's see how hard he begs for you. I wonder if he'll be as desperate to save you as he was your brother." Then his hand was back around Harley's neck and Tony roared, throwing himself into the glass.

"Let him go! Let him go! You've already got your sick fix! I learned my lesson, let him go!!" He screamed

"See, I don't think you have, Anthony."

"Tony, help," Harley chokes, mouth wide open in a desperate attempt for air.

"Yes, I have, I have. Please," Tony begged, "just please, put him down... please."

Howard slowly lowered Harley back to the ground, a sad frown now etched on his face.

“I’m not doing this to hurt you, my boy. I’m doing this for your own good. You will never be able to reach your full potential with these trivial matters holding you back. Children who are not even of Stark blood? It’s a waste of your time.”

*“It’s not, I swear it’s not, Dad. I’ll do better. Anything you want. I’ll send him away even... just don’t hurt him, **please** .”*

*Howard smiles softly, reminiscent almost. “Maybe, he **does** love you, child.”*

Then he looked back up at Tony and for a second Tony felt he might actually have won. Harley had been lowered to the floor and the boy was breathing again, tears of relief falling down his face, but then his father’s gaze turned stony once more and placed either hand on both sides of Harley’s head.

“But that’s his mistake.”

Harley’s eyes widened, realizing the implications of that statement and he stared at Tony, eyes full of fear, begging to be saved. “Dad! Hel--”

But he was cut off by a resounding crack as his neck was split in two, and he fell to the floor in a heap, joining his brother.

And Tony screamed...

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry... blame the late night angst mood...

And to be fair, it was never my plan to leave it here, but it just got a bit too, long, and, well... yeah. But I promise it won't be another whole month till I update again.

Goodness, I hope I don't keep having these long gaps between chapters cuz it stresses me out. Anywho... yeah... sorry to come back with this, but I hope you kinda enjoyed it a little bit. I apologize for the lack of Peter, but he'll be making a comeback soon, don't you worry!

I'd love to hear your thoughts. As always, love all you guys!

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

I'm back. Sorry for the long wait again... I'm just bad at self-discipline I guess

Pls enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He's startled awake by a hand pressing down on his chest and it makes his breath catch in his throat. His jaw tenses and his eyes snap open in a sudden panic as his hand shoots out to grasp the wrist of the offending hand and twists it away from him. He rolls into an offensive position on his knees, hovering above his offender and pinning both arms above their heads with one strong hand. The other he kept hovering in the form of a fist, waiting with erratic breaths for his vision to clear.

He can't see through the dark haze in his eyes and his ears were still ringing from the reverberating screams echoing through his room from earlier. All he can hear are the screams, the gunshot, and a forever echoing "Dad!" before the telltale snap. It takes him a moment for his senses to come back to him and to get control of his breathing before he passed out and risk leaving himself vulnerable to his attacker below him. The heavy ring of muddled cries and echoing voices fade into a soft hum of a single panicked voice. He shakes his head and his lips curl up to reveal a bare-toothed snarl, eyes straining desperately to focus through the blurry darkness of the room.

He can feel his heart pounding and his chest heaves with a pained cough as his lungs suddenly reopen, air being drawn in with a sharp sting that irritates his entire chest. Images of his father's frowning face project against the dark backdrop fighting against his vision, followed by the graphic scene of Peter and Harley's bodies lying limp on the floor, one lying in a pool of blood and the other lying with their eyes open, mouth hanging from a loose jaw as he stares into an empty void with a permanent expression of sudden terror.

Tony gasps sharply through his bared teeth, choking on an angry scream as his eyes bulge from his skull, head whipping around in a panicked search for his father.

He was here.

"Tony," a quiet voice whispered into the darkness beneath him, but the voice nor the words registered with him. Not until he felt a dainty hand rip itself from his grip and press slowly to the side of his face. It startled him, and not in a pleasant way. And if she hadn't spoken right after, or if he wasn't at her full attention he'd probably have done something he'd regret.

"Tony, Honey. You're scaring me. Calm down." The words make him pause. His fisted hand from earlier wavers slightly, arm tense and his screaming instinct fighting against his clearing judgement. He gulps, but he doesn't move.

"Pepper?" He whispers slowly. He's confused. Just as confused as he was when he woke up in that empty room with no discernible way of entry or exit.

"Yes baby." She releases a relieved sigh from beneath him, hand on his face now slowly stroking up his cheek and threading into his hair. "Yes it's me. It's only me. It's okay."

Tony's entire body trembles with sudden a release of tension. "Pepper," he repeats, relief flooding his voice as he finally lowers his fisted hand to the mattress and releases her other wrist.

"Yes honey. Now it's okay, but you need to get off of me now before you hurt the baby."

Tony leaps away as if he'd been burned, his entire body heating with panic. He scoots to the edge of the bed, planting his feet on the ground and bending at the waist to rest his head between his knees. "I'm sorry," he mutters. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

He feels a hand lay on his back. It slowly lifts to gently massage his necks and shoulders in an attempt to help him relax, but it doesn't work and he continues his mumbled mantra. "I'm sorry."

"No honey, it's okay," Pepper whispers softly, gently stroking his hair before leaning forward to press a soft and loving kiss to the exposed skin of his neck. "You're fine, I'm fine. Everything is okay. We're home, we're all safe."

Tony shakes his head. His breath catches and his body tremors as his heart rate spikes, because *no*, they're not safe. Not anymore. He gasps sharply, lifting his head to stare at their bedroom door. His body itches to leap into action, grab Pepper and his kids and hide them away where nobody can ever find them.

"Howard's alive," he whispers, eyes wide as if the pronouncement was a sudden revelation. "He's coming, oh god," he chokes, abruptly stumbling to his feet as his hands curl into fists once more

The hand drops away. "No, no, no, Honey," Pepper sounds panicked as well but not for the same reason as him, "Honey it's just a dream. It's okay, we're safe."

Tony ignores her. "He's coming for the boys. He's coming. He's gonna kill them," he starts at nothing more than a whisper before things begin to escalate and his panic morphs into a feral instinct to protect. "Where are they?!"

He bolts from the room, shouting at the top of his lungs as he stumbles his way down the hall. "Peter!!"

He vaguely registers Pepper's shout for him to stay calm but it's too late for that. There's no hint of calm lingering in his thoughts any more and, considering the circumstances, he doesn't really think he should be calm about this.

"Harley!"

His desperate shouts yielding no response does nothing but spur his panic... the moment and the adrenaline pumping through his veins so interchangeable with the scene in his dream. The dream that felt so vivid and real that there was no way it could be coincidence. For all he knows, it wasn't even a dream to begin with.

Please, let it just be a dream.

"PETER!" He reaches the boy's bedroom door, stumbling to a sudden stop and nearly ramming into the wood of the closed door. Peter's door was *never* closed.

Something was wrong.

The bedroom door across from Peter's opens slowly and Elena's head peeks out, face puckered with worry as she shyly hides behind her own door.

“Signore Stark? What is the matter?”

Tony ignores her, fumbling for the doorknob. “Peter!” The door flies open violently when he pushes it in, swinging right into the wall with a loud slam.

Tony storms towards the small bed, crossing over the scattered toys and stacks of books littered across the room. He tears the comforter from the bed, fully expecting for Peter to be laying there, peacefully asleep because Pepper had SAID that it was all just a dream goddamnit! She said it was just a dream! But he wasn’t *there* . Peter wasn’t there.

His breath gets caught in his throat when he’s met with nothing more than cartoon astronauts on his sheets and a mountain of stuffed animals. He gulps, brain short-circuiting as he takes a moment to fully absorb the implications of Peter’s empty toddler bed.

“Peter?” He calls, a bit quieter, turning slowly in a circle to inspect every corner of the room, hoping the boy was just up and quietly playing. He feels dread bubble up from his stomach, up his throat, and up and up until he had the sudden urge to vomit. His father was alive. He had Peter.

Where was Peter?

His breathing is ragged and he mindlessly scrambles through the room, tossing toys and clothes and books every which way in the meaningless search he knows it to be. “Peter! Peter come on this isn’t funny.” His throat burns and his chest tightens enough that the tension ripples through his arms and down to his hands and suddenly they’re heated with a harsh numbness which leaves him no control.

Then he hears footsteps running down the hall and suddenly he’s able to hear the panicked shouts from outside the room. Elena was shouting something in a panic, and the hurried footsteps were growing closer. It wasn’t until they stopped at the door and the footsteps were finally matched with a familiar voice that Tony paused in his search.

“Tony?”

It was Harley.

And if Harley was *here* and he was alright that meant it couldn’t have all been true... right?

“Harley,” Tony sighs with a deep keen in the back of his throat, shoulders sagging with his heavy release of breath. The surge of desperation slowly diminishes in his eyes and the fiery determination mellows into a soft relief as he surges forward to grab the boy and reel him into a tight, protective embrace. “You’re okay. You’re okay.” Tony pets his hair slowly, keeping the boy’s head in place against his shoulder as he holds him tight. That feeling of panic slowly depletes and the moment takes precedent in his sense of reality, pushing the dream away, back into the drawer of fictitious imaginings. It still lingers though, just a little bit... because at the back of his mind he still can’t help but allow the question “where is Peter” to consume his thoughts.

“Tony what’s wrong?” Harley mumbles into his shoulder, trying and failing to crane his head up to look at the man, but Tony’s tight hold didn’t give him much wiggle room, as if the man were determined to keep Harley shielded from the outside world despite the fact that the dangers are no longer real. Maybe it was Tony’s way to reassure himself rather than him, Harley thought... so he decided to stay put and let Tony hang onto him as long as he needed.

“Shh,” Tony shushes with a shaky breath, having no intent on letting him go anytime soon. Instead, he drops his head to the kid’s shoulder for a moment before lifting it again to press a kiss right above his ear. “It’s okay. You’re okay.” He holds him tighter.

Harley doesn’t say anything else. He seems to understand. He wordlessly lifts his arms to wrap loosely around Tony’s waist and relaxes into the hold, instead of pulling away like he would probably usually do.

It helps ease him a bit, but the more time that passes, the more the anxiety builds back up and the more desperation he feels to find his other child. He’s conflicted though. He needs to keep this one safe... but he needs to save the other one. He doesn’t know whether to let go or not, because that would be choosing again... he can’t choose. Not again. He can’t let go.

And just when the conflict inside him was becoming a bit too much, Tony looked up to see Pepper standing idly in the doorway, hand on her stomach, with Elena at her side, the younger woman chewing on her nails anxiously.

“Where’s Peter?” Tony breathes slowly, never releasing Harley. And he watches as Pepper’s face drops into a sad smile, eyebrows furrowing in pity as she slowly approaches them at the center of the room.

“He’s having a sleepover with Dom, remember Honey? He had so much fun with his Zio he wanted to stay. We talked on the phone with him right before he went to bed..” She reached out and stroked his cheek gently. “He’s safe. I promise.”

Tony shakes his head. Because he isn’t. Peter will never be safe without him there to protect him, because his father is alive and he knows he would kill Peter without a moment’s thought.

“Howard’s coming,” he whispers, a thick glaze covering his eyes as the memories slowly resurface. The world goes fuzzy for a moment as his mind recalls the awful nightmare in perfect detail. “He’s coming. We have to leave.” Any sense of calm he had before dispersed quickly as his panic and determination overtook him.

“Honey, no,” Pepper whispered softly at the same time Harley pushed his head back to look between the two adults with wide eyes of panic. “Don’t panic, it was just a dream.” Tony doesn’t seem to believe her.

“We have to leave, and we’re not coming back. I’m done. I’m out. We’re leaving. *Now* .”

Pepper lays placating hands on both his shoulders and gives him a serious look. “Just calm down,” she says softly. “I’ll call Dom and tell him to bring Peter home. He’s safe; we’re safe. It was just a dream, okay? You’re father’s gone, Hon and he can’t hurt you or anyone else anymore, I *promise* .” Then she turns to Elena and waves her away with quick instructions. “ *Call Domencio and tell him to bring Peter home right now.* ”

“Si, signora,” she bows and hurries off to do as she’s told.

“Peter will be home soon,” Pepper soothes. “And look, Harley’s right here,” she places a hand on the boy’s back, hoping to distract Tony once more. It seems to work for a moment as Tony’s eyes travel back down to the boy, eyes wide and glazed over with a glossed over dissociative stare. “See, he’s fine, and Peter’s fine too.”

They stand there in silence for about five minutes, letting things mull over in Tony’s head. And suddenly, as if the man had been struck with an unanticipated revelation, he releases Harley and

rushes from the room. It startles Harley *and* Pepper as the man pushes past her in his rush.

One thing they both knew for certain: Tony was not himself.

Without much thought, Harley tries rushing after him, worried he'd hurt himself or someone else during his 'episode'. God, this brought back some unfond memories of his mother when she went through one of her episodes. He was the one who took care of her... he knows how to deal with stuff like this. So, he can help Tony too; he's sure of it.

Though, he's stopped by a strong hand wrapped around his bicep just as he's rushing past the threshold of Peter's room. He turns his head and it's Pepper. She has a worried frown on her face, staring at the retreating back of Tony. "Don't do that Hon. It's best not to startle him right now. He's not himself."

"I know. It's fine," Harley responded gently, slowly detaching her hand. As he did so, he could hear the front door open and close, assuming Tony was headed outside. That's when he felt a surge of newfound panic. What if he tried something?! What if he tried hurting himself and Harley wasn't there to stop him like he was always there to stop his mother?

So, Harley tears away from her, chasing after Tony and ignoring Pepper's demands to stop. He didn't listen. He rushes after Tony.

He makes it outside and as far as the steps on the porch before a strong hand grabbed the back of his shirt stopped him, and reeled him back into a hard chest. He knew who it was before he even got the chance to look and he growled in frustration. Asher was the one scheduled to guard the house that night... He hadn't told Tony about Asher yet because, well, it was a bit humiliating, but that didn't mean he liked the man any. And now he was keeping him away from Tony when it was obvious the man needed his help.

"Let me go," Harley growled, throwing himself against the man's hold in an attempt to break free, but Asher only wrapped an arm around his front and held on tighter, forearm coming to rest atop his collarbone as Tony paced back and forth in the drive, hands pulling at his hair in a manic fashion, talking under his breath now as his chest heaved frantically in what looked to be the start of a panic attack.

"I don't want you getting hurt, kid." He sounded sympathetic, and if Harley didn't already kinda hate him maybe he would be more open to listening. Asher was a decent guy when he wasn't pissing him off with his stupid power plays. And he was a good and loyal soldier to Tony and Tony trusted him... that's why Happy sent him. He *knows*. But he still didn't like him, and he really needed to get to Tony before the man ended up hurting himself or someone else in the midst of his anger. He'd hurt someone... but he would never hurt him. Harley knows that. And by then he could hear Pepper calling for him from inside the house, quickly approaching the door, and he was running out of time. So, he fought harder.

"I'm not letting you go Harley. He's not thinking straight right now and he could hurt you--"

"Tony!" Harley called in earnest, pulling against the man's arm and grunting in the strain to escape. Tony's entire body goes rigid before a slow tremor travels from his neck to his toes, his head swivelling to look at them. His eyes darken and Harley can't help but gulp. There was no Tony he was familiar with left in those eyes. No comforting brown, deep and caring with so much ease. No, these were dark with anger and panic, whites surrounding them nearly gone completely, displaying only a soulless void into the empty shell of a man left behind.

"Let go of him." It was a whispered command as he stalked forward, head bowed to accentuate his

burning anger and Asher immediately complied, pulling away from Harley as if he had been burned by the man's sharp gaze, lifting them in the air to show he meant no harm to the boy.

On release, Harley scrambled down the stairs he had been stopped in front of, and rushed towards Tony who was making his slow approach. But the man didn't so much as acknowledge Harley's presence as he passed, simply pushing him to the side with his eyes still fixed on Asher.

It happened in a second, and Harley couldn't help but watch in horror as Tony grabbed the front of the man's collar, dragged him down the steps and flung him onto the grass with an angry scream. Asher rolled, grunting on impact as he flew into the ground, but he didn't have much time to recover as Tony swiped the gun holstered in the man's belt and straddled his chest, knees on either side of his ribcage and his free hand pressing down on the base of the man's throat. Then he stuffed the muzzle of the gun into his mouth. Pepper was outside now, screaming for him to stop, muffled together with Elena's panicked cries as well. But he wasn't listening.

"I've given you one too many warnings," Tony growls, teeth bared. He pushes the gun in further, watching Asher choke against the cold metal. "Don't. Touch Him."

Just as he begins to pull the trigger, something hard collides into his side, pushing him over into the grass and dislodging the gun from Asher's mouth entirely just before it goes off. It takes Tony a couple of seconds to regroup, lying on his back with a heavy weight on his chest and someone attempting to pin his arms to the ground beside his head, his captor being oddly careful of touching his left wrist. He turns his head to search out Asher first, of course, watching the man scramble to his feet and rush back to the porch where Pepper was calling him inside. Tony growls, beginning to push out of the grip on his arms, but they tighten.

"Tony, don't. I'm okay. I promise."

He turns his head to look up at Harley. The boy's straddling his stomach, just as he had been to Asher moments before.

"You need to calm down. Just calm down, okay?" It was a plea that time. "It was just a dream, I promise. No one is going to hurt us, okay? It's okay. Peter's going to be here any second and you'll see, it's going to be okay."

That little episode seemed to cool Tony down for a few minutes, and after he was sure he wouldn't try maiming Asher again, Harley helped him off the ground. Natasha and Clint have long since come running as soon as they heard the gunshot go off, and they had dragged Asher back to their quarters across the lot as Harley and Pepper waited with Tony on the steps for Dom to show up with Peter. Harley leant his head against Tony's arm, and Pepper looped her arm through Tony's opposite arm keeping him grounded.

So, when Dom's car did putter up the drive, Tony was already jumping to his feet and dashing towards the car. Ready to rip the hinges off the backdoor to get to the boy snoozing in his carseat. Though, even after Dom put the car in park, he kept the backdoor of the car locked, despite Tony's desperate attempts to yank it open.

He knows just seeing Peter alive and well should have been enough, but his skin was prickling with his uncontrolled adrenaline and he had the unexplainable urge to just hold him and not let go. Because Peter was too still... his eyes were closed and his face was lax. It did nothing to ease his hysteria.

But Dom calmly stepped out of the car and approached him carefully, grabbing his upper arm and holding him still. Tony's head snapped up to look at him, and then his eyes darkened to pair with

his growl. "Open the damn door."

And Dom had a glare to match him, simply tightening his hold on Tony's arm.

"Open. The goddamn door Dom!" Tony shouts, enunciating each word with a spit of venom.

"No," Domencio answers, shaking his head calmly, "you need to calm down."

"I don't need to calm down! You need to open this door before I shatter this window and open it myself!"

"Tonio, look at me," Domencio's voice hardens with the strict command and he grabs the sides of Tony's face to force his eyes onto him. Tony complies, anger slowly melting into helplessness as he stares at the older man. "You don't need to frighten Pietro. Just take a few deep breaths Mimmo and calm down." His calloused thumbs slowly stroke beneath his eyes and Tony closes them as he does as he's instructed.

"Howard killed them," he whispered, squeezing his eyes closed as his entire face puckers as he fights off the dry sob, "I thought he killed them."

"A dream?"

He nods and Domencio pulls him close. Tony drops his head to the man's shoulder and shudders as the older man slowly pets down the hair sticking up from his constant messing. "I don't want him coming back," Tony begs through a soft whimper. "Don't let him come back, please."

"It's not real," Dom whispers, "your boy's are safe. He can't hurt you anymore and he will never have the chance to hurt your family again."

One hour later, and everything has peacefully returned to order. Somewhat. Once Tony had Peter in his arms he calmed down. Peter had been tired and sleepy, and completely unaware of what was happening, more than willing to cuddle with his dad, like always. And soon they all found themselves gathered in the Living Room. Tony lied on his back on the couch, peacefully asleep as Peter laid sprawled across his chest, also asleep. Harley was placed between Pepper and Dom on the adjacent couch, legs curled up and head resting against the pillow in Dom's lap as the two adults talked in a hushed whisper about what had transpired to trigger Tony's harsh reaction. Harley was just glad Pepper didn't send him to bed... because he didn't think he'd be able to sleep after all this.

Because what if Tony was right? What if Howard was still alive? Would-would Tony be okay if he was? Just the thought of Howard being alive had the man in hysterics...

"Has this ever happened before?" He eventually whispers, openly staring at his brother and father-figure sleeping. Dom combs his fingers through his hair and both adults pause in their conversation.

"Sometimes, but never this bad," Pepper answered under her breath. She watches them too.

"More so when he was younger," Dom added on with a hesitant thickness in his voice.

"Why?" Harley whispered, eyes lifting to look at them, but his head remaining still in Dom's lap. "Why's that happen?"

"He just gets a bit stressed sometimes." Pepper responds, eyes softening as she reaches out to

gently rub the arch of his sock covered foot.

“That doesn’t--” Halrey starts, being cut off by the large lump in his throat as he watches a sharp intake of breath trigger a visible shudder in Tony’s chest. “He’s never like this.”

“It happens sometimes sweetie. Daddy’s been through so much and sometimes he’s reminded of those bad things when he’s pushed them away for a while. He’s filled with so much anger and worry and sometimes he just needs to explode so he can feel a little better. Does that make sense?”

Harley doesn’t answer right away, instead, thinking back on the thoughts of his mother earlier. “Is he-- was he having a breakdown?”

He’s all too familiar with those. He’s never had one himself, but his mother... they were a near constant occurrence after his father left. But *she* was sick. Tony wasn’t.

“Kind of,” Pepper hums with a thoughtful nod.

“But-but, he’s not sick... Is he?” Harley hates the way his voice breaks. Maybe it’s because he’s tired or he’s kind of freaking out about what’s been happening because he never thought he’d ever see Tony like that. So not in control and so desperate...

“Well, in a way he kind of is Honey,” Pepper says with a thick voice. “He’s really good at not showing it, but sometimes a person can’t help but be a little sick when they’ve been through more than they should be able to handle.”

“But he’s strong. He’s supposed to be able to handle anything.”

Pepper looks down at him and gives a sad smile, and for a moment it seems that Harley was the one to make the final point, but then Dom speaks up with a newfound cheeriness in his voice. “Oh yes, he’s one of the strongest men I’ve ever had the honor of knowing. But not everyone can be strong all the time Patatino,” he rubs his hair gently. “He’s just like a strong, hard metal. If he’s too strong and hard, and does not soften enough to allow others to share the load, like your Mama or your Uncle Rhodes, then too much pressure will make him break because he isn’t pliant enough to absorb and carry the pressure.”

Harley nods, and his brows furrowed as he mulled over it... He could tell Pepper wasn’t quite getting the metaphor, but Dom continues anyway.

“But then, if you make a brittle metal really cold... just like when Tony has no fiery vengeance to melt his composure and release the pressure every once in a while... then he will shatter. It is worse than breaking. Do you understand my boy? He’s been strong a bit too long and it is beginning to take a toll on his mind.”

“Tensile strength,” Harley answers to voice his understanding.

“That’s right,” Domencio praises, “So every once in a while, your father has to break to get rid of the pressure on his shoulders. It is so much responsibility and guilt resting on one man. You would have to question if he was even human if he did not break every once in a while.”

And that made sense... It made a lot of sense. And it brought him a sense of comfort. The strongest man he’s ever known can break and it’s nothing more than proof of his humanity. It’s okay to break... to show a weakness... to be scared. And it’s okay to depend on others to take care of you... you don’t have to be strong all the time.

And with that final thought, Harley was able to relax, a sense of serenity passing over him as he

slowly drifted into a deep sleep.

Or maybe it wasn't that deep... he thought it was. It was more like a short catnap, because he woke up what apparently was only 20 minutes later. Pepper was nowhere to be found and Dom was now standing beside the couch Tony and Peter rested on. Harley watched as the man gently draped a large afghan over the two, tucking it in, so the edge came to rest just at the base of Peter's neck, where Tony's thumb was idly stroking the soft skin beneath the overgrown clump of hair there. And Dom tucked the other corner into Tony's side, then lifted a hand to gently push through Tony's hair, fingers weaving through the greying roots and soft curls the man always tried to hide. Harley could only watch, transfixed by the open display of affection. The way Dom treated Tony with so much love... it made his insides curl into a tight warm ball of contentment.

But then Dom turns and Harley wasn't fast enough to fake sleep. The man catches him watching and smiles, approaching and taking a seat right beside where Harley's head rested, combing through his hair just like he had Tony.

"You are supposed to be sleeping, Patatino."

"You really love him," Harley whispered, not caring at all about the randomness of his pronouncement.

"That I do," Dom nodded slowly.

"Why?"

He just needed to know...

"He is a very lovable man, Mimmo. I love him for the same reasons you do."

"No you don't," Harley argues through a yawn and insistent shake of his head. "You love him like a son. I love him like a Dad. You did this," Harley moves his hand through his own hair as a reenactment of the man's actions. "He does that to me... and Peter all the time."

Dom nods slowly, eyes cast to the side as he emitted a soft sigh of defeat. "I was very close to your Nonna her whole life." He makes a long pause, and Harley forces himself to sit up, slowly digesting the statement, mulling it over in his head as to how that should be the reason Domencio would love Tony more than his own father did...

Then his neck snaps over to look at him and his eyes bulge from his head. "You're-you're... you're his secret Dad aren't you? Like-like his real Dad. He's your secret love child?"

Domencio laughs, as if the very idea was absurd. "Oh I do wish. I'd be nothing but proud to call him my son, but no... I..." he trails off slowly and Harley watches his face carefully. "You cannot repeat what I'm about to tell you my boy... nobody can know. And only Tonio learned himself after his parents passed."

Harley nods emphatically and Domencio sighs.

"I was the proper heir to the Carbonell fortune before Tonio's father married Maria."

"You mean??" Harley trails off... "you mean you're our actual Uncle. It's not just some honorary shit like Rhodey?"

Domencio laughed. A genuine laugh and patted Harley's head. "Yes. Your Nonna was my baby sister."

“That-that’s why you hate Howard!”

Dom frowned and nodded his head. “Yes. He forced Maria into a marriage she didn’t want...” a heavy sigh escapes him and he hangs his head. “She was so young and he manipulated her, telling her if she married him, he’d spare our family if we stepped down from our positions. And after Howard dragged her across the world, he sent someone to kill my father, my mother, and my younger brother. I was the only one to escape... so I ran. I changed my name, married, and only returned when I heard word Maria had a baby... a new Carbonell” His head turned to gaze softly at Tony. “I had to come and see for myself... and I fell in love. Just like Tonio did you and Peter. And I never turned back.”

For Tony, the next week and a half was busy as hell. He had woken up that next morning, feeling humiliated and ashamed for losing his cool the way he did, and let’s just say it took a couple days to keep from yelling at anybody who so much as looked at him wrong. He was just tired... and no matter how hard he tried to repress it, he couldn’t help but notice that lingering thought of his father. Especially at night, when he was lying flat on his back staring at the dark ceiling with nothing but his own thoughts to distract him. His father always found his way into his head, and it terrified him. But he had to power through... there was too much he needed to do and he couldn’t get distracted now.

The first thing on the doccate when he was feeling a bit more sane, was dealing with Asher. He was a good soldier, but god, he was more trouble than help when Harley was in the mix. They were like two explosive compounds when they came into too close of contact with each other. Nothing but disaster could come out of them being in the same room. He’d heard what the man did in the market the other day, and he had been meaning to speak to both Harley and him about it, but he had just been too busy dealing with the aftermath of the whole ‘don’t trust Stark’ situation. He, and the two brothers had to have so many secret meetings with their father and his old pal President Odin. It was ridiculous, but in the end it was worth it and they had a solid plan to earn the people’s trust back. But now the situation was taken care of. He sent Asher home on the first flight back to America and Happy was supposed to be sending a replacement any day. He apologized, of course, for his inappropriate actions the other night, and Asher had willingly forgiven him, claiming he was not in the right state of mind.

He’d also been in close contact with Steve and Rhodey the past week about the Barnes situation. Ross, or someone had apparently figured him out before Steve was able to warn him, and he had disappeared into the night. Steve was a mess, and Tony found himself talking down a hysterical ex-police captain more than actually problem solving the situation. Rhodey, though, was there to give him a sensible report every day about Barnes. There was no word of his capture, so they could be confident that he was out there somewhere. And, okay, Tony wasn’t really attached to the guy. He hardly even knew him. But the information he probably has on Ross is invaluable, and he’d rather not lose it.

So, overall, he hadn’t been getting much sleep lately. Especially not with Peter’s insane sleep schedule. Though, more often than not, those first few days, Tony found himself participating in Peter’s routine nap times because he was still a little bit stressed... ok a lot a bit... and he brought Peter along to work with him as often as he could to sorta ease that stress. The kid’s like a human anti-depressant. It’s insane. Of course, when sensitive topics of discussion came up that he’d rather Peter not be there, there were a multitude of soldiers who were jumping at the bit to babysit the boy, mostly Thor... God, Thor loved that kid a ridiculous amount. He got no work done when Tony brought Peter around, but Tony couldn’t blame him. His kid was adorable. Plus those two were just two peas in a pod. They could probably spend all day just hugging each other and be perfectly happy.

Though, today, things were mellow. He didn't have work piling up to his neck, drowning him in a pool of stress. Nope. Instead he spent his day taking care of menial tasks around the Compound, taking his time to visit with old friends and introduce himself to new recruits training under them. Peter gladly accompanied him, more than happy to meet new people, which meant Thor wasn't far behind, which also meant Loki was there too. It was a good day. And he had plans to drop by and pick up Harley early since it was the last day of his punishment, so they could spend a bit of time together around the Compound. Maybe do something fun. But that plan was quickly ruined by the kid's ridiculous need to create chaos.

Everything just went to shit.

"Signore! Signore!" Tony pauses in his hushed conversation with Loki and Thor as they leisurely make their way down one of the many halls. Peter sat atop his shoulders, cheek resting against the top of his head as he indulged in his usual afternoon nap. Tony turns at the waist to face the approaching newcomer. It was Lidia, the head of the cleaning staff. She was a nice, petite little old lady, with graying hairs and wrinkled skin to show off all her years of constant smiling. Tony liked her, she was nice and grandmotherly. She was respectful, but she also wasn't afraid to speak her mind, and she definitely wasn't afraid to scold him when he made a careless mess of his office carpet. He didn't mind... she always made him laugh with her half-hearted grumbles. Although, now, her usual cheerful demeanor was absent, and was replaced with a stressed, put upon exasperation as she stalked towards him.

She approaches them, speaking in rapid Italian while waving her duster wildly through the air to accentuate her irritation. She barely reaches Tony's chin, standing in front of him with a fire in her eyes that only a poor old Italian woman could muster.

"*Slow down, now ,*" Tony chuckles, lifting one hand in a placating manner, "*I can't understand when you're talkin' that fast, Hon. What happened this time?*"

Lidia shoots him a disdainful look and Tony can only sigh because he knows what this is about... or rather, *who* this is about.

"You're *boy* ," she spits in English before immediately reverting back to her native tongue. "*He's taken apart all of my vacuum cleaners!*"

Tony rubs a hand over his face.

"Hmm," Loki chuckles in amusement, "I've also seen him gutting all of our tv remotes. This must be a common occurrence for him."

Tony sighed and squeezed the bridge of his nose softly. *They didn't even know the half of it* . The kid literally couldn't help but leave disaster in his wake, and his hobbies apparently haven't much changed since his time at the Tower. Julio, their main chef, had thrown quite the fit after the second day with Harley when the kid took apart the toaster and reconfigured the coffee machines.

"Bring him here," he instructs with a careless wave of his hand. He's been meaning to talk to him about it, but it wasn't like the kid was doing any harm. It had been amusing in the beginning, when the kid would tear apart small appliances at the Tower for whatever reason, which he later found out was him scavenging for parts for his infamous potato gun. Now, though, the kid's little tinkering and dissecting tendencies are seeming to become a bit of a problem.

"No. You come," she says instead, gesturing for Tony to follow her as she storms off in the direction she came from. So Tony adjusts Peter gently and follows, too tired to be bothered that he was now taking orders from his cleaning staff.

Thor and Loki follow, continuing their conversation with him as Lidia leads them towards the staff quarters, and she pushes open one of the many utility rooms just in time to hear a loud explosion and several shrill screams that follow it from the staff inside. Peter startles awake atop his shoulders and immediately begins to cry.

Tony seemed to be the only one out of the adults to be panicking. He throws open the door wide and is immediately met with a frantic staff and a grinning Harley at the center of the chaos. Hair and face coated in some form of soap as the boy stared into the red mop bucket of goop between his knees, giggling manically. When Tony realizes no one has gotten hurt he appeases Peter's frantic cries of "Daddy Daddy Daddy," and his desperate grabby hands by lifting him off his shoulders and holding him to his chest. But before he could enter the room and scold Harley for what was obviously his doing, Lidia beat him to it.

She's in the room, hands on her hips, and an angry face as she scolds the boy, her words so fast Tony is sure Harley would never be able to understand her. But to his surprise, Harley is quick to argue with the women, speaking just as quickly as he crosses his arms over his chest defiantly as she grabs his head and pulls him forward to clean the mess off his face and hair with a rough washcloth.

"--I was just having some fun. No one got hurt this time and nothing was destroyed."

"You were supposed to clean, not play! These chemicals are dangerous and expensive and you have wasted at least a month's supply!" She gestures frantically to the foaming bucket of stuff.

"I knew what I was doing!"

"No !" She shakes her finger in front of his face then whacks him with the duster. *"No excuse ."*

Tony swears he actually hears Loki giggle from behind him, and, okay, it was kind of funny... but he's dealt with this same thing every day for about a week. Or, well, Lidia has. He's just listened halfheartedly to the woman's complaints at the end of each day when she meets him with Harley a few minutes before it's time to leave when he's too exhausted to really give a shit about Harley's hilarious experiments. And it was very obvious the usually calm woman's patience was wearing thin and it was more than obvious that Harley got a kick out of pissing her off.

"Clean this up ."

She gestures to the foamy mess and Harley throws his head back and groans before slowly getting to his feet and storming towards a supply closet. He still hadn't spotted Tony and the others outside the door.

"I think maybe you should take him into your shop," Thor comments, eyeing one of the disassembled vacuum cleaners propped against the chair the boy had just vacated. "This looks like when you're in the midst of one of your projects."

Tony shakes his head to Thor's suggestion and adjusts his hold on Peter. "Did that once. Not gonna do that again. The kid knows too many of my secrets already."

Peter stops crying once the shock of the loud boom wears off, the sudden mood change startling Tony, and he is now eager to get down and explore the new area his brother apparently spent his time. "No Pete. Not now." Tony groans, a bit irritated that Peter had been woken from his nap so soon after such a long fight on his part. Every day the boy woke at the crack of dawn and stubbornly refused to go to bed without at least an hour in front of the telescope, which meant they had to wait for dark... he was a god damn stubborn nightmare and if he didn't get his proper nap

in... well... then Tony's job gets infinitely more difficult. "Go back to sleep Peter."

"Nooo," the boy whines, kicking his feet. He pushes at his father's collar, trying to get down, but Tony keeps a tight hold on him. "Ha'ley!"

Tony frowns and grabs the boy's wrist, pinning them to his side as he hugs him tight to his body, rocking slowly back and forth in hopes it would coax the kid back to sleep. And of course, Harley comes as soon as Peter summoned him, rushing back around the corner. That's when he spots Tony.

"Tony?"

Lidia looks between them both and settles her hand on her hips. "*Yes. I went and got your father since you keep destroying our supplies! Maybe he can knock some good Ol' sense into you!*"

Harley glares at her. "*I haven't destroyed anything!*" He shouts. "*I told ya I'd put them back together when I got time,*" he gestured wildly with both hands to the gutted vacuum a few feet away from him, then gestured towards the mop bucket and chemical supplies lined up beside it, "*but you pushed this whole thing on me before I even got the chance!* I was just havin' some fun." He crosses his arms over his chest and frowns. Then he turns to Tony. "Look'it Tony." He walks towards the vacuum and kicks at a loose piece. "Tell her I didn't break it. I was just makin' them easier to run."

"You should definitely take him into the shop," Loki mutters to himself, nodding his head as the corner of his mouth quirks up in a small smirk, "he's a slightly more reckless version of you. Could use a teacher."

Tony feels a suggestive nudge against his arm and he rolls his eyes, but he approaches Harley anyway, ignoring the man's comment. Peter continues to struggle against him, reaching out desperately for Harley to hold him and save him from the 'oh so terrible' treatment his father was inflicting on him.

"Peter," Tony says his name with a warning in his tone as he slowly crouches beside Harley in front of the machine. "If you don't quit it I'm gonna have Thor take you up to your room and make you go to sleep in your bed. Do you really want that?"

And just when he thinks that threat might've worked, he heard a shrill growl before he felt a sharp sting on his shoulder.

He shouts in surprise before yanking Peter away from his body by the underarms, the menacing snarl the boy was directing at him taking him completely by surprise, and, well, Harley looked quite shocked as well by the boy's violent actions.

"Did he just—?"

Tony growled, eyes narrowing at the small four year old he held in front of him. "Yeah," he snapped, "he did."

"Why did you bite me Peter?" Tony asks him slowly, raising a brow and fighting down the urge to shout. He did not need to cause a scene right now.

"Cuz Daddy bein' mean to Petey," he snaps.

Tony frowns deep. "Daddy is not being mean," he corrects with a curt scoff. "Daddy's making sure you take your nap so Mama will let you stay up tonight." He doesn't mind throwing Pepper under

the bus. Partially because it's true and also because the woman could do no wrong in the child's eyes.

Peter kicks him... *hard*, and Tony tries his best to muffle his pained "oomf," but it was still quite obvious with the way he bent slightly at the waist and hissed through his clenched teeth.

"Peter," he grits slowly, reaching forward to grab the boy's arm in a tight grip. The kid *definitely* needed to finish his nap. "I'm not going to argue with you about this right now. I have work to do. So, Loki is going to take you up to your room." He lifts the boy beneath the arms and turns to deposit him in Loki's unsuspecting arms. Peter immediately kicks and screams in protest.

"No! No!"

Tony ignores him and fixes Loki with a look. "Give him 15 minutes in timeout then make sure he goes to bed. Don't leave the room; he's a sneak."

Loki gives him a look. "I'm not sure if I'm the best option--"

"No!" Peter screams again, this time reaching hopelessly for Thor. "T'or p'ease! T'or! Not Loki."

Loki begins to move to deposit the child in Thor's arms as he requested, and Thor is more than ready to take him, but Tony stops them with a firm 'no' and shake of his head. "No offence Thor, but I can't trust you to put your foot down with this one." Then he turns back to Loki. "Take him upstairs. Don't give into him. I'll be up to relieve you of your post once I'm done here."

He heard a distinct snort of amusement from behind him and it was easy to assume it was Harley, because who else would it be. So after Loki leaves with Peter dramatically wailing as if the world had ended, Tony turns around to fix him with a look.

"What's so funny?"

Harley smirks at him. "Nothin'. You just make it sound all serious, like," he puffs out his chest and lowers his voice in imitation of Tony's, "'I'll relieve you of your post when I'm done here'." He laughs again, holding his hands to his chest.

"Hm," Tony offers, shooting him an obnoxious smile that could easily be mistaken for a sneer, "hilarious."

And just like that his good mood turns sour.

Then he turns his attention back to the disassembled vacuum cleaners and upon first glance he can definitely see where Lidia's frustration was coming from. For an inexperienced eye, the machine looked far from saving, but he's certain he'd be capable of fixing it. As for Harley? He's not so sure.

"What was the plan here kid?" He squats, elbows braced against his knees as he assesses the damage. So, Harley immediately jumps into his plan to refine the suction of the vacuum and increase the capability and elasticity of the belt. Although, the boy's rant quickly faded from the analytics and began focusing on his frustrations with life.

"And I *told* her I could put it back together and make it run better, but she didn't listen! I told Julio the same thing about the coffee machines! And even after I fixed it he was still mad."

Tony sighs and slowly rubs his eyes. "It's the principal of the matter, Ace. You need to ask permission before you decide to jump in and disassemble a piece of expensive equipment.

Especially when you're supposed to be *working* .”

“But I was going to fix it!” Harley argues vehemently. “It’s not like I was taking it apart to be an asshole.”

Tony narrows his eyes. “Watch your mouth and watch the tone kid.”

“M sorry,” the kid mutters indignantly, “but I still don’t see the big deal. I’ve fixed everything else I’ve taken apart; it’s not like this time was going to be any different.”

Tony watches in the background as Lidia and a couple other staff clean up Harley’s mess while muttering exasperatedly under their breaths. It makes him feel bad that his kid-- *his responsibility* - - was the one behind the cause of everyone’s frustration. Albeit it being minimal and coated in a layer of loving irritation, it still irked him. The kid needed to learn his place. He may be his son, but that didn’t mean he was allowed to dismiss anything else an adult told him. He was still a child after all.

“It’s about having respect for your authorities, Buddy,” he responds calmly, hoping this conversation would remain civil and not turn explosive as do most of their other “conversations”.

They’d been doing so well lately. Harley’s been working on his attitude, and Tony thinks their compromise and his promise to allow Harley a chance to begin minimal training had something to do with it. (There’s a good chance it has something to do with his little ‘freakout’ a week and a half ago because he doesn’t think his parenting skills are *that* good yet). The only mischief he seemed to get up to was this. Other than that he’s heard nothing but good reports from everybody. He’s been getting on well with most everyone he meets and Tony couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride, especially since he’s taken note of the noticeable difference in Harley’s confidence.

“Authorities?!” Harley growls, eyes narrowing at Tony. “She’s a cleaning lady! How does she have any authority over *me* ?!”

Ok... maybe too much confidence.

Tony doesn’t grace him with any anger. He simply raises one brow as if to let him rethink what had just spilled out of his mouth, voicing a simple “excuse me” to make sure he got the point.

But Harley doesn’t back down. Goddamn his stubbornness. Now Tony knows how Pepper feels.

“They don’t mean nothing. They take orders, they don’t give ‘em, and nobody has to respect them. I’m supposed to be your kid and everybody shows me respect. If anything, I have authority over her. I’m smarter, younger, and know a lot more about what’s going on than she ever will and you know it.”

Okay, so now Tony’s getting a bit angry. “I can see all this power is finally getting to your head, huh kid.”

Harley scoffs at him. “No it’s not. It’s just the truth. The only person I should have to answer to is you.”

“And yet, you don’t even do that half the time.”

Tony frowns and crosses his arms over his chest. Then he turns back to look at Thor who had been idly observing the entire exchange. “I’m gonna deal with him. Would you mind helping Lidia and the girls out? Make sure to order them whatever the kid destroyed and whatever else they want. I’ll be back to apologize personally in a few minutes--”

“I didn’t destroy nothin’!” Harley immediately argues, but Tony cuts him off and grabs him by the arm. He gives a rough tug and drags the boy out of the room, away from any prying eyes for the discussion that he’s fairly certain will not end without one of them losing their heads.

When Harley realizes Tony isn’t just taking him outside the room to talk privately, he gets a bit worried. “Tony c’mon. I didn’t mean it.” Harley whines when Tony doesn’t let go. He keeps tugging Harley along further down the hall. “Don’t make me go home. I didn’t mean it.”

“Which part didn’t you mean? The disrespectful comments or your new self-absorbed attitude?”

“Neither!”

“Hm,” Tony humms skeptically, “See I’m not sure that’s true.” He pulls Harley down the hall, giving a harsh pull to swing Harley’s body in front of himself to lead him through a large threshold, into a open lobby-like room

“Ok fine,” Harley groans, “I slightly meant it, but what’s the big deal? Weren’t you wanting me to have confidence about this whole thing? I thought you wanted me to get used to demanding respect and taking control, right?!”

Tony lets go of him suddenly and he stops in his tracks. He narrows his eyes as he pokes an angry finger into the kid’s chest. “There’s a difference between having confidence and being a selfish, conceited brat. And, just as a quick review of “what I said” before... yes, I said you need to demand respect, but you need to deserve that respect before you ever have the right to demand it. And treating others disrespectfully, and treating them like they’re lesser than you just for kicks, is not how I run things, you understand? If you ever want any position of authority, you need to learn how to put others before yourself.”

“But you tell people what to do all the time!” Harley cries, gesticulating wildly to Tony’s body, and Tony raises a brow.

“And?”

“And *what* ?! You *do* ! You tell everyone what to do.”

“Yes, because that’s my job. I’m in charge and my people depend on me to tell them what to do. But when have you ever seen me treat someone unkindly who didn’t deserve it?”

Harley just looks at him, a challenging stare in his eyes. “What about that guy you killed two weeks ago?”

“I did have a reason,” Tony grit out neutrally, hiding his anger behind a faux curtain of calm. “You don’t have the clearance to know that reason, so if I were you I’d drop it real quick.” He grabs Harley again and starts down another Hall.

Gosh he wishes the elevator to the penthouse wasn’t so goddamn far.

“Why don’t you trust me?”

“We’ve been over this, kid. It’s not about trust. Nobody but Rhodey, I, Thor, or Loki have that clearance... and Pepper of course. Not even Happy knows about it.”

Harley frowns. “Dom does though...”

Tony blinks.

“I know he does. He knows everything and he doesn’t even work for you!”

“That’s different Harley, and you know--”

“Yeah. ‘cause he’s family right? He’s trusted ‘cause he’s family. So what does that make me? You said yourself that we’re supposed to be family now. Does blood suddenly matter?”

“Kid--” Tony sighs, anger fading into reluctance. He feels sudden dread, knowing where this conversation was about to go... again, but then the kid exclaims with excitement and it’s such a sudden change in mood it has Tony’s head snapping up to look at him in confusion.

“Woah!” The kid grins breathlessly. He’s peering into the open glass window of the door, tugging on Tony’s grip on his wrist to pull him closer, all conflict completely forgotten. “Are they doing training in there?! Is that Valkyrie and Tashi? Woah!”

Tony rolls his eyes.

“Ouch!” The kid winces with sympathy for the poor guy on the mat with Tasha as his gut absorbs a harsh blow, grinning as he watches the trainees. Then he turns to Tony with a bright sparkle in his eyes and Tony just *knows* what’s going to come out of his mouth next.

“C’mon please!”

“Harley, we agreed we’d start your private training tomorrow once your punishment is over. I don’t think--”

“And it’s practically already over!” Harley reasons, “And besides I wanna do some *real* training. I’ll show you I can handle it.”

“We talked about this Harley. I said no. I want you to have a private trainer.”

“C’mon,” he whines, “I’ve literally been so behaved this week and you know it! We haven’t argued once and I’ve done everything you’ve asked me. Just lemme try this once! Pleeese.”

Tony gives him a look. “I’m not sure if I’m curious or worried about what your definition of behaved actually is.”

Harley rolls his eyes, and gives one more quick glance towards the training room door. “I’m sorry I’ve just been bored, okay? I got frustrated! Is that such a sin?”

“You’re not ready--”

“I am! I promise! I’m tougher than I look Tony.”

Tony finally lets his frustration peak through, because no matter how many times he says *no*, the kid just won’t listen! And he’s done with having this argument.

“You know what?! Fine! Let’s train.”

He reaches for the door and Harley’s eyes brighten with excitement.

“Really?” Harley replies eagerly.

“Don’t get excited kid,” Tony mutters, “this is gonna be anything but fun. Trust me.” He frowns deeply.

There's an endless spiel of angry curses in his head as they enter the room, mostly unnoticed thanks to the calm chants as Natasha happily wipes the floor with one of their most promising trainees. He's literally had this same conversation with the kid multiple times, and he's debated the topic with Rhodey and Happy about whether the kid was ready... they had all agreed that he most definitely was *not*. They had decided that, no, he probably shouldn't be training Harley to be one of his soldiers so young, especially since the usual training procedures were so intensive. He was fine with Happy teaching the kid self-defence because that was practical in case he ever got caught up in a dangerous situation, but he never had the intention of putting Harley through the typical training regime he and Happy had set up for his men. He's pretty sure that maybe Harley thinks that small taste of training with Happy is what he's expecting the training to be... but ohhh, that poor kid is sadly mistaken. And by the looks of today's practice, Harley will find out exactly what it is he thinks he's missing out on. He supposes he should've done this a long time ago to finally get the kid to shut up about it, but now is a good a time as ever.

Plus he thinks it'll serve as a reasonable punishment for how rude he'd been to Lidia earlier. He'll be sure the kid said sorry to her before they left for the day.

He grabs Harley's limp hand before he drags the boy through the crowd, which parts like the Red Sea once they realize who the jerk shouldering through everybody really was. He marches right up to the front of the class, in front of the boxing ring where the young man Natasha had beat the shit out of was stumbling to his feet. Harley waves with a proud smile at the couple guys and girls he's met over the past couple weeks as they pass.

Then Valkyrie turns and spots Tony from where she was casually leaning against a table stacked high with papers and various training equipment, a smirk inching up her face. "You finally decide to chaperone a class?"

Tony smiles back, then tugs Harley forward. He lets go of his hand and settles his hand on the kid's shoulder. "Not quite. I'm actually enrolling this one for the day."

Natasha jumps down from the boxing ring, giving Tony a sharp look as she approaches. "What's with the change of heart, Stark?"

Harley grins. "I wore him down."

Natasha grins at him, shooting him a quick wink, and Valkyrie claps him on the shoulder.

"Welcome to hell kid," Valkyrie smiles just as Natasha is ushering the next candidate into the ring with her while the previous loser trudged slowly towards the track at the very back of the room where several other guys were jogging. "After two more, you'll be up, kid. Watch and learn."

So he does. Him and Tony stand to the side and observed until it was his turn. The young guy that had clambered into the arena with Nat looked nervous and kept glancing back at Tony like he was scared the man would toss him in the street if he messed up. Everyone else was looking at Tony too, he noticed. There were a lot of mixed emotions in the room. And Harley could easily pick out the overly confident ones and the humble. He wasn't sure which was better to be.

After Nat knocked the young guy on his back she was kneeling on top of him, keeping his arm twisted behind his back as she did a cool whip with her hair to swing it out of her face and she turned to face the class with a smile as Valkyrie spoke to the group. "*Can anyone tell me where Luca went wrong ?*"

Harley knows. It was the first mistake he'd made with Happy when they started boxing. He's not sure if he's any better at avoiding the mistake, but he can pick it out no problem 'cause he's been

watching YouTube. He just had to figure out the right words in Italian so he didn't end up making a fool of himself--

"He exposed his weak side and left himself unbalanced." A quick voice from the crowd piped up. Harley craned his neck to try and spot the source of the pretty voice, but he was kinda short compared to the crowd and he couldn't see. So, he watched Tony instead, and the man's head turned for the same reason as the crowd broke away to expose the young woman who had spoken.

"Woah," Harley wowed at her. She had pretty long dark red hair that rivaled Natasha's and sharp contours on her face. Her chest puffed out defiantly as she crossed her arms. She looked so badass. So pretty... and she couldn't be *too* old. Maybe, like 20-something... *Wow*.

Then he felt a thump on the back of his head and he winced, hand shooting up to rub at the sore spot. "Don't even think about it," Tony muttered from behind him.

"You got it newbie!" Valkyrie smiled. "Why don't you come on up next."

Natasha released her hold on Luca and ushered him off to join the other trainees around the track. Harley bites his lips nervously seeing how exhausted some of them were as they moved onto the next drill. It looked to be like a whole routine of exercises each had to go through before joining the group near the ring once more. Yikes. He didn't realize he'd be doing intense exercises as training... well he did, but he supposes it didn't really hit till just now.

So the girl moves to the front and jumps into the ring with Nat, offering a sharp smile, and Harley didn't mean to stare... but he totally did.

Harley watches, transfixed, as the two fight as if it's just an elegant dance. The girl only lasts for all of 30 seconds before Nat has her laid out on the mat easily. Harley winces when she goes down on the mat hard.

"Looks like the newbie's got some skill," one of the guys in the crowd whistles and Harley couldn't help but agree. But it seemed the girl didn't seem too pleased with herself even as Nat helped her up to her feet with a kind smile. Harley turned to judge Tony's opinion and he couldn't really discern much from his neutral expression. But when he lifted his hands to slowly clap before moving towards the group. Harley didn't know if he should follow or stay where he was, but... he wanted to meet her so he followed after Tony just 'cause he could.

Tony held out a hand to help her as she jumped down from the ring, but she dismissed it and jumped down herself. Harley grinned. He liked her already.

"Impressive performance, Ms...?"

"Nebula," she answers curtly, pushing her hair out of her face. She grabs Tony's offered hand to shake it, and Tony grasps it tightly.

"Nebula... you did good. You have a promising future here with us, I can tell."

"I can pick the good ones can't I, Stark," Valkyrie teased and Tony smiled at her and nodded. *"Well you lasted past the 30 second mark, kid. Looks like you can skip out on the drills this round."*

So, she nods sharply and moves back out into the crowd. Harley follows her with his eyes. She was totally *hot*.

"Alright, Mr. Stark. Your turn. Get on up there before your Dad changes his mind." It takes Harley a moment to realize he is the one being spoken to, and his neck snaps back to attention. He forgets

he's supposed to be a Stark now sometimes.

He ducks under the ropes lining around the box ring, eager to prove himself to Tony since the man seems to think he's still an incompetent weakling... he just hopes Nat takes it a little bit easy on him. But he knows she likes him pretty well, so she won't embarrass him too bad.

Then he hears the cheering, and, okay, he'll admit that he thinks it's for him at first and it makes his chest fill with pride and he almost preens at the praise, but then he hears the rope snap again and he turns to see Tony climbing in after him.

"What are you doing?!" Harley whisper-shouts under his breath and through gritted teeth. He swears the man can't help but embarrass him constantly.

Tony ignores him, and slowly shreds his jacket, draping it over one of the pillars at the corner. Then he turns his chin up at Nat and nudges his head to the side in a dismissive gesture. "Nobody touches my kid. No offense." Then he turns to Valkyrie and nods towards the table beside her. "Lemme see the wrappings quick."

Harley can't help but gape at the man before he glances around the open training room shyly as Tony wraps the hand wrappings around his wrists and knuckles, weaving it through his fingers with a focused crease on his brow... or maybe that was anger. He wasn't so sure with the way things had transpired over the past few minutes.

He and Tony stood at the center of the boxing ring. He then rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, and Harley could only assume that *they* were going to be the ones sparring. He could still hear the excited chatter and chanting of the crowd, and he let his eyes glaze over them. And... okay... he supposes it's pretty cool he's the only one getting this chance to spar with *THE* Boss man. Everyone was already excited enough just to see him in action.

"You ready, Ace?"

No. He wasn't... He's been dying to spar with Tony again since it was so much fun last time... but this is very different. Tony's probably not gonna coax him through each step and patiently walk him through the lesson. Nope. He's got a feeling that's not what's gonna happen this time around since now he has an audience and this happens to be a legit training class where obviously the trainers don't go easy on the trainees.

"Don't embarrass your kid too much Stark." Natasha calls from the side with a teasing grin.

Tony grins back then takes a couple steps backwards towards the ropes opposite of Harley, and the boy gulps, risking one more glance at the excited crowd as Tony toes off his shoes then tears off his socks, tossing them in the corner near his discarded jacket. "I thought you were s'posed to be takin' it easy," Harley mumbles to him under his breath. "Bruce says you should wait to do any fighting till your knee is all the way better."

Tony only shoots him a snarky grin and takes an easy stance. "Are you kidding? This is gonna be the easiest workout I've had in years."

"Hey!" Harley growls, finding his annoyance melting into reckless confidence. He took a threatening step forward with a sloppy stance of his own, "I can do-- OOF!"

He's knocked to the floor in a second. Tony'd effortlessly grabbed his wrist and used that as leverage to spin him around and kick a foot in front of his ankles to knock him to the ground. The man stands over him, hand still holding tight to his wrist, then looks out to the crowd, speaking

before Valkyrie ever had the chance. “ *Can anyone tell me where he went wrong?* ”

Hands shot up in all directions, eager to please, but Tony narrowed in on one individual in particular. One that didn't have their hand raised. Harley spotted her too and his eyes widened in embarrassment when he realized what Tony was about to do.

“I wasn't ready!” He protested vehemently, but he was ignored.

“Nebula?” Tony calls on, watching the girl carefully.

The girl crosses her arm over her chest and tilts her chin up. “It's too long a list, sir.”

Tony smirks then slowly stands, hauling Harley up with him. He dusts him off and ruffles his hair slightly. “Eh, I suppose I went a little rough on him, didn't I.”

“Yeah, because I wasn't ready yet,” Harley muttered, pulling away when Tony reached for his hair again. He didn't need Tony treating him like such a child in front of all these guys.

“Well, Lesson #1: Always be ready,” he addresses the crowd as he says that as well then turns back to Harley. “Alright, well you've had your turn. Now go on and hurry through those drills, Scamp.”

Then Tony grabs his coat and his shoes then jumps down from the ring, and Harley follows, heading in the opposite direction with a flame of embarrassment in his cheeks and dread in his chest.

The drills were nothing like he's ever experienced before in all his years of physical education. He thought sixth grade PE was hard? Ha! That was child's play compared to what this looked to be. When he had reached the track there was another instructor with a whistle in his mouth standing off in the sidelines. He spotted Harley and frowned in confusion. “Your papá know you are here?”

“Yeah,” he mutters under his breath, turning to point out Tony on the outskirts of the crowd, lounging in a lawn chair and looking far too cheery as he lifted a glass of *something* in acknowledgement to the trainer.

“Ok then,” The man said, straightening his spine, giving him a quick once over before pointing out the track. “I will spare some pain for you, signore. Five laps around,” then he points somewhere else where about 5 other guys were doing various rigorous exercises. “5 reps of 20 pushups and crunches.” Then he points to the pullup bar. “20 curls ups and pullups.” And he lists off about 3 more exercises and Harley can already feel his inexistent asthma kicking in. This is totally not what he was expecting. He got all of two seconds of fun, and it wasn't even that fun, and now he has to do this? What a rip off!

But he's not gonna back out now. Because backing out would be admitting defeat and proving to Tony that he was right all along and that he wasn't ready for this. So, he sucks it up and heads towards the track with a heavy sigh.

He wasn't a quitter

After Tony watches the kid huff and puff his way around the track about 3 times he gets a call from Loki on his watch. He answers it, immediately feeling panicked when he realizes he had completely forgotten all about Peter.

“Yeah?” He answers quickly, activating his earpiece and shoving it in his ear. He stands and marches towards the indoor track, prepared to pull Harley out in case they needed to leave, because

there was no way in hell he was leaving the kid here without proper supervision.

“Your child has woken from his nap,” Loki mutters without amusement, “and he’s very upset for some reason. He’s snotting and crying all over the place.”

Tony can’t help but roll his eyes. Loki was many things, but he was not the nurturing type. “Bring him down to Valkyrie’s class. I’m here with Harley.”

And it goes to show how uninterested Loki is in his parenting and life decisions because he doesn’t even question it like everyone else has thus far. He simply hangs up and Tony doesn’t hear another word from him until five minutes later when the man shows up with Peter in his arms.

Thankfully, Tony had moved to a less crowded portion of the room for a clearer view of Harley, so there wasn’t much of an audience around him. Although, Peter had turned quite a few heads during their trek with his loud wails.

“Daddy,” he sobbed, reaching out for him desperately. “I so sorry! I so sorry!”

So, Tony sighs. He’s never able to stay mad at the boy. He takes him from Loki and hugs him to his chest. “It’s all good Mimmo. I forgive you.”

Then Tony notices Harley’s just about to finish up another lap. “Wanna go say hi to your brother?”

Peter nods eagerly against him, face still hidden against his chest. So, Tony gestures for Loki to follow and they all three head up to the track.

So, by the time Harley’s dragged his sweaty as hell ass up to the line, he’s greeted by three familiar faces. Peter has since migrated to Tony’s shoulders, waving happily with one hand and wiping at his eyes with his other. Tony gives him a smug ‘I told you so’ look and Loki’s repressing an amused smirk of his own. Harley cannot express how pissed he is as he strolls passed them at a fast pace despite his noodly legs.

By the time he struggles through his pushups after collapsing on the ground to catch his breath about a million times, Thor had joined the fray, talking what appeared to be business with Loki and Tony as Peter played with a couple action figures atop Tony’s head.

This had to be some form of child abuse. He was sure of it.

Harley was barely able to finish the drills. And at least 20 guys have lapped him too and they were doing even *more* than him. God it was embarrassing and he feels like he’s coughed up a lung at this point. He’s sweating like a pig and Tony’s pushed so much water on him over the past hour that he feels more bloated than he’s ever been. But he wasn’t going to quit. God no. Because quitting was for losers...

So, when he’s finally finished he collapses on the floor and breathes, soaking in the coolness of the tile beneath him. But then he hears footsteps and he cranes his head to look up. He finds Tony towering over him with a sardonic grin on his face. “You ready for round two, champ?”

Harley’s head snaps up from the floor. “What?!”

Tony laughs at him, as do a couple of the other guys effortlessly running through their share of exercises. “What? You think you do one run and you’re done? You’ve got at least three more rounds to go. I thought you said you were up to this?” He gives his tone a false sense of confusion.

Harley groans and throws his head back against the floor, letting the rumble roll deep into his soul.

“You’re a jerkface and I hate you.”

Tony grins. “You know,” he mulls with a smirk, “all I heard is “you were right dear father of mine” echoing through my head.” He twirls his finger beside his head.

Harley doesn’t grace him with a response. But he does receive the urge to flick him off... but he represses that urge, knowing good and well that single action could lead to dire consequences. *Hey, at least he’s learning.*

Then Tony’s crouching beside him. “I don’t hear you saying it.” He mocks. “Say it. Say I’m right and then we can go home and you can get a nice long shower.”

Harley tipped his head to the side again to glare up at him, but he didn’t utter a word.

“I’ll take the silence as your admission,” Tony snarks, crouching down to grab onto Harley’s bicep and haul him to his feet. Harley could feel the eyes of everyone watching them and he wanted nothing more than to melt into the floor than stay alive for another minute and face all the teasing that was sure to come about his inadequacy. But that wasn’t possible, so he mustered the last little bit of his energy and stood tall on his own two feet and followed Thor and Loki from the room. Peter’s in Thor’s arm, chatting happily to the large man as he bounces the figures around through the air.

Once they’re through the door, away from any prying eyes, Harley groans a loud groan and throws his weight against Tony. Tony doesn’t seem so surprised, more than ready to hold the boy’s weight.

“I never want to do that again.” He groans, hands snaking around the man’s waist and clinging tightly. And Tony may or may not be grossed out by the sweat coated child pressed against him. Instead he pats his back slowly and hums in amusement, but he quits with the teasing and sighs. He wasn’t about to tell the kid that that was only one of many routines trainees went through. God, if the kid ever found out about the knife throwing it would be the end of his sanity.

“Well, you should’ve listened to me when I said no. I would’ve eased you into it slowly so you wouldn’t have collapsed after your tenth pushup. Golly I knew you were scrawny but do you have no muscle?” And just like that the teasing was back and Tony squeezed the boy’s bicep. Harley mumbled something incoherent against him. He doesn’t even pull away.

“Is Harley alright?” Thor turns to look at them when he notices he wasn’t being followed.

“He’s fine. Just tired I think, huh pal?”

Harley nods, arms acting as a limp loop around Tony’s torso. “Let’s get you home then.”

And once they do get home, Harley doesn’t hate to tattle on him to Pepper.

“Mama,” Harley whines, stumbling towards the couch when he spots his mother there reading a book. He collapses, head in her lap as he sprawls his limbs, completely exhausted.

Pepper glanced away from her book and glanced down in confusion before looking up at Tony as the man tossed his bag into a chair before placing Peter on the ground. He caught the look on her face and smiled. “He was being a brat today. So, I let him do some big league training.”

Pepper fights off her smile, lowering her hand to comb through the boy’s knotted hair. “Well, you

should've listened to your father, hun."

"James Buchanan Barnes," the loud, yet raspy voice announces.

Bucky thrashes frantically in the chair he's tied to. He can't see, he has a blindfold wrapped around his eyes, and the gag in his mouth filters his shouts into muffled mumbling.

"I'd like to warmly welcome you to Hydra. I'm sure you will have a lovely stay."

Steve was totally going to kill him.

Chapter End Notes

Ok does anyone have any tips on how to NOT make every chapter over 10k cuz like i've been trying real hard to condense this crap guys, and i guess it's just physically impossible for me. Like it's srsly getting ridiculous at this point. i'm sorry

Anyway I hope you enjoyed! Lemme know what you thought

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I don’t like this.” Tony grumbles, holding on tightly to Peter’s small hand as he watches Pepper fuss over Harley’s gelled hair and Dom adjusts the boy’s custom suit. Peter busies himself trying to scale Tony’s leg one step at a time, using the man’s arm as leverage while completely mindless to his pouting. Instead, much more intent on contorting his body into odd positions to keep himself entertained, head bent back and mouth hanging open as he watches Harley get fussed over.

“It is tradition, Tonio,” Dom, smiles, stepping back to take Harley all in. “Your boy is of age, it is only proper.”

“He’s only thirteen,” Tony snaps back, free hand lifting to rub his jaw, “he’s not-- he’s still just a kid.”

Dom gives him a look, and so does Harley.

“I’m fourteen, Tony.”

“Not on paper, you’re not,” he argued back, and he felt Dom smack him on the arm.

“Tonio, this is important!” Dom scolds him gently. “It is tradition. I would have never stepped foot in this building if I did not know this was important.”

And, okay, Tony agrees completely, but *still* . If they do this... Harley’s stuck. This will be his life, his future; no turning back. Then again, as he watches the eager smile grow across the kid’s face, as he chatters excitedly to Pepper about “*always wanting to see a legit mafia initiation*” , he knows it wouldn’t really make a difference. This was already Harley’s life, and he’d remain a part of it forever. And as much as Tony wished the kid would have the opportunity to live a normal life... he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t looking forward to watching him grow and eventually work at his side to become the man *and* leader Tony knows he could be.

“ *He is the heir, Tonio. It is expected. It is his birthright.* ” Dom, squeezes his shoulder.

“ *I know. But it doesn’t mean I gotta like it. I just wanted to keep him as far away from this as I could.* ”

There’s a steady pause as Dom slowly digests his words, and the man finally understands. “ *This is what he wants... you are not your father .* ”

And Tony knows he’s right.

“He’s ready,” Pepper announces, grinning wide and hugging Harley close as she kisses the side of his head repeatedly as tears form in her eyes. “My baby’s all grown up already.”

Tony sighs with a sad, reminiscent smile on his face. He releases Peter’s hand once the boy’s feet are planted safely on the ground and are no longer digging into his thigh. And as soon as Tony releases him, Peter immediately moves in front of his uncle, raising his arms and jumping insistently until the man obliges and lifts him into his arms. Then, Tony steps forward, and lays both hands on either of Harley’s shoulders as Pepper steps away. He looks down at the boy in front of him with a bittersweet twinkle in his eyes. He’s proud... but he’s scared.

“ *You sure this is what you want?* ” He whispers through the thickness in his voice. “ *You’re ready?* ”

Harley smiles up at him and gives his head one emphatic nod. “ *I was born ready.* ”

Tony scoffs at him, using it to hide the lump in his throat and the heat growing behind his eyes.

“You do realize this doesn’t change anything,” Tony sniffs, and, yeah, he knows Harley can hear the shake in his voice, but he really didn’t give a shit. “No guns till your 30. And definitely no field work till at least 20 years after I die. You understand? My old-man heart won’t be able to take it.” He points his finger into the boy’s chest then quickly swipes at his eyes with the same hand.

God, he *never* used to cry. These damn kids have him going way too soft.

“Yeah, I know,” And Tony gets a good look at his kid, finding that Harley’s eyes were also growing a bit glossy and his voice was just a bit wobbly. “I um... I really do appreciate you letting me do this. I... it means a lot.”

“You’re my kid,” Tony forces a smile, “and, well, it’s tradition. Plus, Dom insisted, and he was right... you’re old enough to have the right to choose. And, y’know, he’s old and senial, trying to live out his glory days through you, so...” He winks and Harley chuckles.

“I’m sure.”

“Gosh,” Tony trails off, eyes still settled on him, “Rhodey’s gonna hate that he had to miss this.”

There’s a moment of awkward silence between them where the only noise is Peter chattering happily to Dom in the background about all the fun new words he had learned with Harley in preparation for tonight.

“You um,” Tony clears his throat, “You remember what to say?”

Harley laughs awkwardly. “Yes Tony. You and Mom have been drilling me all day. I’ve got it. I promise.”

“Ok ok, just making sure. Don’t want you making a fool of yourself again.” Harley playful shoves his arm, and Tony bares his teeth in a wide, teasing grin.

And just like that, the silence was back and Tony had to bite down hard on his instinct to run from the awkward exchange. So, instead he shuffles his feet and lifts his chin slightly in a showy attempt to hide his sensitivity. “I’m proud of you, y’know.

Before even a second could follow the tender sentiment, he felt a body collide into him and arms wrap tightly around his waist. It takes all of two seconds for him to wrap his arms around Harley’s shoulders in return, resting his chin on top of his head.

“I love you too, you big baby,” Harley mutters into his shirt. And, okay, maybe Tony lets one tear slip through at that one.

And of course the moment is interrupted, like their moments usually were. Across the room, the side door swings open, and Loki steps in with Thor not far behind him. The latter wearing the widest grin he’s worn on his face in a long time (and that’s saying something). The man rushes forward just as Tony releases Harley, and he swoops the boy into his arms, swinging him in a quick circle.

“I am so proud of you, my brother. You will be the best soldier we’ve seen in a long while. I am sure of it.”

“Eh-eh,” Tony cuts in quickly, “he’s not a soldier, he’s being *initiated into the family*. ” Tony enunciated each of the words with a strict growl.

“And what’s the difference Stark?” Loki stepped in with a teasing smirk. “This is an initiation ceremony.”

“The difference is, he’s *thirteen* and he’s my son. This is a coming of age ceremony.”

“It’s all one in the same,” Loki smiled, shooting a wink Harley’s way.

Five minutes later, Tony found himself standing at the front of a dimly lit room with light illuminating his space from above. The auditorium is filled with familiar faces, almost all of which appeared to be brimming with excitement. He couldn’t help but let a small smile inch across his face as well, especially when he glanced at the front row. Pepper sat between Thor and Dom, one arm around Peter’s waist who was on his feet in front of her, leaning back against her legs and waving excitedly up at him, the other holding up a camcorder to record the entire event for Rhodey... which, okay, that’s not usually allowed. These things were *very* confidential, but he decided to make a special exception.

He glanced beside him at the small table where the needed materials lie, and he takes in a shuddering breath, remembering quite distinctly his own initiation the day after he turned thirteen and ‘became a man’. *He* , unlike Harley, hadn’t had a choice in the matter and sometimes he can’t help but wonder who he might have become if his father hadn’t forced him down this path. Before he could get too much into his own head, Loki emerged, guiding Harley by the shoulder towards the center of the open space where Tony was patiently waiting for them. The crowd remains silent out of respect, except of course, for Peter’s eager claps when he sees Harley walk across the slightly elevated stage. Dom was quick to reach over and quiet him by grabbing one of his hands gently. Tony chuckles under his breath, and he swears he doesn’t snort under his breath...

Soon the ritual begins, and it would be a lie if Tony said his heart wasn’t racing.

Harley holds his hand out and Tony gently takes it in his own and begins to speak, raising a knife in his other hand. “ *By spilling your blood on the face of our elders, you will hereby remain oathbound to this family and take on the responsibility of holding the heritage of being a true Stark born heir. Do you accept the permanence of this dedication and responsibility?* ”

“Si signore,” Harley answers with a slight shake of his voice.

Tony looks out at the crowd, “ *Are there any objections held by any of our members present today that Harley Stark shall not take this position in our family .*” Silence fills the room and a sense of relief floods over Tony’s heart.

“ *All in favor of this Union?* ”

Slowly the crowd raises their left fists, thumb folded over their curled fingers. Then Tony brandishes a knife in his own hand, as does Loki standing on Harley’s other side, and Tony looks over to find Thor helping fold Peter’s fingers the right way also and it warms his heart when the boy proudly raises his fist to join the rest.

Then Tony lifts the knife slowly to Harley’s hand and he swallows heavily, pushing back the sudden bulk of panic. Harley’s hand shakes slightly in his hold, and Tony releases a long breath as

he discretely runs his thumb along the boy's palm to soothe him. Then, he holds his breath as he slowly presses the tip of the blade to the center of the boy's hand and slowly drags it up to the tip of his middle finger as light as he could. Applying just barely enough pressure to slice open the skin, leaving the thinnest trail of blood in its wake. Tony's insides shutter, a cold chill travelling through him as he turns to place the old, blood stained blade on the table and grabbing the two small wallet-sized pictures of his great grandfathers, Edward Stark and Antonio Carbonell... Howard hadn't included the Carbonell's for his initiation and Tony knows it broke his mother's heart... so, now, in honor of her, and Domencio, and the rest of the family Howard had mercilessly killed, he now makes sure all his men understand their *full* heritage.

He holds both pictures up towards Harley and Halrey first looks down at them, then up at Tony. “*In honor of the Stark tradition, please give your blood in representation of your endless loyalty to the Omerta oath our ancestors have instructed of us.*”

Harley does as he's told as he slowly smudges his blood on both photographs. Tony hands them to him as Loki steps forward, lighting a match against the badge sewed onto the sleeve of Harley's jacket. The fire lights with a quick strike and he carefully lights the cards held in Harley's hand.

“*Please recite the oath .*” Loki instructs him.

Harley slowly trades the cards from hand to hand as he was told to do, and carefully recites the oath he'd been practicing all day.

“*I will, from this point forward, undertake the code of silence. I will never rat out a fellow soldier, or divulge any secrets compromising the integrity of the family and especially the Boss, even in the face of torture or death. I will remain loyal to the Boss, my father, and obey his orders, no matter what. I will provide my assistance, if necessary, to any other respected or befriended allies of our family. I declare vengeance on any attack against a family member. “An attack on one is an attack on all.”.*” As he speaks the phrase, the room speaks with him in unanimous syncrasy. Then he continues. “*I will avoid authorities and other factions in conflict with us.*” Harley finishes by releasing a long blow of breath through the circle of his lips and quickly drops the burning photos into the small metal bin Tony held beneath his hands before the licks of flames could scorch his fingers.

Tony smiles proudly at him, then places the bin on the table, reaching for the next item, a shining gold medallion with the Stark insignia carved on the face. Tony lifts it to show to the crowd.

“*Harley Stark, an official member of the Stark Family .*” This time a loud single uproar of “*Ti Lodo*” filters through the crowd before it silences once more. “*Now, for his official coronation.*” He slowly places the medallion in Harley's open palm, noticing the slight dampness shining in the boy's eyes as he stares down at the crest resting in his palm.

“*Please, recite the oath of an heir ,*” Tony instructs, feeling his throat close up as well.

“*I hereby swear to honor women, children, elders, and those who have sworn their loyalty to me. I will protect and serve all in need. I will live my life striving to protect my soldiers and follow in the footsteps of our fearless leaders of the past. I will follow and protect my father and my family, and hereby accept the responsibility that will befall upon my shoulders when I come of age if I shall fail in protecting him .*” He glances up at Tony shyly. “*Lastly, I swear to share my inheritance and heirship with any future Stark children who declare loyalty through means of the Omerta oath .*” Then with that, Halrey holds the medallion to his heart and lifts his hand, curling his fingers into a fist and resting his thumb across the front of his fingers. “*Sono sottomesso a tutti voi.*”

The crowd slowly bow their heads, and lift their arms to mirror the action as they all speak in

unison “E io, tu.”

As their heads are bowed, Tony quietly lowers his arm around Halrey’s shoulder and pulls him close to whisper in his ear. “Welcome to the family, Mimmo.”

That night was the funnest night Peter ever had! After Harley’s special speech was over Mama had let go of him to clap, but Peter didn’t think clapping was enough for Harley. Daddy said this was important! So *so* important! So, instead of clapping, he darted straight to the stage before Mama or his Zicio could grab him. And with a small grunt he hefted himself up onto the stage and scrambled to his feet to sprint forward and throw his arms around his big brother. He was sooo proud!

And Harley was grinning so big as Peter hugged him super tight. He even knelt down to give Peter a *real* hug and Peter kissed his cheek. After all that, Peter thinks maybe he wasn’t supposed to run up on that stage, but he didn’t care. Harley smiled so big, so it was good.

Then after that, all of their friends came to the house and he helped Zicio make pizza for everyone! He got to punch dough and eat tons of cheese when he wasn’t looking. Then while all the pizzas were cooking Elena helped him change into his swim trunks so he could go swim in the pool! Thor, Clint, Daddy, and a few others Peter recognized were all in the pool with Harley. Mama was sitting in her chair, and Tashi and Zia were sitting beside her. Before Peter had time to do anything more, cold arms scooped him into the air and he shrieked in delight. He got a short glimpse of long dark hair before the slim chest he was pressed against rumbled with a chuckle before a familiar voice spoke.

“Stark! Catch.” Peter shrieked again, realizing exactly what Loki had plans to do.

“No, no, no!” He squealed as the man stepped closer to the edge of the pool. He flailed in his arms, turning his head just enough to spot his father grinning up at him from the edge of the pool as he stepped closer. The water was up to his waist.

Then, Peter was flying through the air and he screamed before plunging beneath the cold water for only a second before he felt strong hands grab him and hoist him up to the surface. He coughed through a giggle, arms wrapped tightly around his Dad’s neck as the man’s scruffy beard scratched against the side of his face as he kissed his cheek with a dramatic smack.

The rest of the evening was great! Everything was perfect, until it was time for everyone to leave and Mama told him to say goodbye to everyone and to give them big hugs because he wouldn’t see them for a while. At first he thought she meant he’d be staying home with her instead of going with Daddy to work or to Dom’s house, but when Daddy put him to bed that night... he found out it was going to be for a long while. Like *really* long, ‘cause they had to go back to New York! That made him so sad, but he tried to hide it from his Daddy and gave him a tight hug goodnight because Peter could tell he was sad about leaving too and he didn’t want to make him sadder.

So, that night, he lay awake in his bed with tears falling from his eyes and heat spreading across his cheeks. He whimpers softly and rubs roughly at his eyes with the back of his curled hand. He missed everyone already... he hugged his closest plushie tight to his chest, pushing his nose into the soft fur between its ears. Daddy said they had to leave tomorrow, and he won’t be allowed to see Thor or his Zio no more.

“Ja’-Ja’vis?” He lifts his wrist close to his face and whispers into the special watch Daddy gave him, because JARVIS always knows what to say. He’s so smart.

“Yes young sir?” JARVIS responds instantly, speaking with a soft tone.

Peter snuffles and rubs his nose along the fluff of his plush. “We gotta leave ‘morrow?”

“Yes, sir. I’m afraid so.” JARVIS answers, voice brimming with affection and sympathy. “Although, I am looking forward to being able to see you again Master Peter.”

Peter grinned into the stuffy, hugging it closer as he released a tiny giggle.

“But I ta’k to ya all da time JA’VIS,” he giggles, “How ya miss me?”

“Well I cannot *see* you Master Peter, and you have quite the adorable face.”

“Why can’t you just see me here?”

“Well, I do not have access to the cameras here in Italy, Master Peter.”

“What?” Peter furrows his brows, lifting his head in confusion and cocking it to the side. “Why not?”

“Master Vision is responsible for all security and monitoring needs. He is a much more advanced system than I. And your father does not want to stretch my limited capabilities across the globe. It would put my servers and abilities at risk and leave my reasoning skills unreliable.”

Peter’s eyebrows only angled down further. “Huh?”

A sound escapes from his watch, that he could only assume to be JARVIS laughing. “I apologize, young sir. It is a complicated issue that I am sure you will understand when you are older.”

Peter stares down at the watch, face illuminated by the soft glow it emitted in contrast against the darkness coating the room. He smiles slightly before his face falls back into a sad frown and tucks his head closer to his chest. “I-I don’ wanna leave JA’VIS. I can’t watch stars no more and-and no more outside... and-and no Zicio no more.”

“*Zicio* , young sir?”

“Zio Dom-dom-domico... Mico” Peter groans in frustration. “Zicio. Zio Dom.”

“Oh I see. Although, I am sure he will come for a visit. And once your father has taken care of the important appointment he has scheduled tomorrow, I have no doubt he’d be eager to bring you back here one day. He has quite enjoyed himself as well.”

“We come back?” Peter asks excitedly.”

“Oh yes. I’m sure at some point you will find yourself back here. Your father often has business to do here, and once your mother gives birth I am sure he will not hesitate to bring you to take care of business. And even if he doesn’t come himself, Mister James Rhodes often goes in his proxy, and I’m sure if you wish, you could go with him to come and visit Mr. Thor and your Zicio.”

“Yeah,” Peter sighs, head coming to rest on his pillow in defeat. “I just like it here lots. Daddy’s always here... and we do so much fun. I love when he talks ‘bout da stars.” He hugs his plush really tight and squeezes his eyes shut. “So pretty.”

JARVIS is silent for a good few minutes. “Well, you still have tonight left. I’m sure if you asked, your father would love to take you out to look at the stars one last time.”

“Daddy told me I gots to sleep,” Peter pouted. “And he put my tezlascope ‘way.”

“Ah, I see,” A warmth lined the undercurrent of JARVIS’ voice and Peter smiled. “Well, I suppose that means you should sleep then, young sir. I will be happy to see you tomorrow as will most everyone else eagerly awaiting your return.”

Peter sighs heavily, feeling his cheeks begin to heat up once more. “Yeah, okay... night-night JA’VIS. Love you.”

“I believe if I could, I would most definitely love you as well, young Peter. I wish you a good night’s rest and I will see you tomorrow.”

And with that, Peter was alone once more, wide awake, dreading the day to come where he’d have to leave this new home he was already so in love with. He loved the outside. He loved the soft grass. The mushy mud by the lake that made funny noises when he stomped around in it with his galoshes. Oh, and he also loved his galoshes! They were blue with a bright red rocket ship on the toes. He loved it when Daddy brought him and Harley to the store to buy them and also all the pool toys. He loved learning to swim and squirting Mama and Daddy with his water pistols, and sometimes Thor and Clint when Daddy wanted to make yummy and messy food on his grill and Thor and Loki came over to eat with them. He loved Thor and Clint too, and sometimes Tashi when she wasn’t being scary. He loved Elena, and all the cool games and toys she would play with him when Mama was napping and Daddy was doing important work stuff. And he *loved* Zicio and Emilia. Zicio always had candy for him and he gave the bestest hugs. Not as great as Daddy, but still really good. Even better than Thor sometimes. He tells awesome stories! And whenever he felt sad, his Zicio always knew how to make him feel better.

But what he loved most... he *loved* waking up early in the morning to watch the sunrise on the porch swing with his Daddy. Just them. He’d sit in his lap, and his Dad would just rock and rock and rock back and forth and hug him super close. He’d fall asleep sometimes, curled up on his Dad’s lap, listening to the soft creak of the swing as it moved forward and back, and the soft hum of a morning lullabye of whatever song was stuck in his dad’s head that morning. And then, the late nights, with Harley, and Mama, and Daddy. All of them laying back on the blanket, curled under a big heavy quilt. Sometimes everyone would quietly talk about their day, and sometimes, Daddy would tell them a story about the stars. He *loved* those stories.

There was one though, that always made him so warm and fuzzy. One very special and just for him. So, on days he was feeling kinda bad, and Daddy was sitting next to his bed, saying goodnight, he’d ask for the same story.

“Do you know why I love the stars so much, Pete?” Tony would ask.

“Why?” Peter would giggle, knowing good and well the answer.

Tony would smile and lean forward before whispering, “Because you are a star, Petey.”

And Peter would always grin, wide and excited for what was to come next.

“A long, long time ago, there was nothing. There was no sun, no moon, no earth. There were no bunny rabbits, or fish in the lakes, no grass or trees. And no you.” Tony would poke his chest with a small smile and Peter would grab his finger and hold on tight.

“But then, one day, the first ever star was born, and for the first time ever, there was light in the sky and it was beautiful. And then there was another star, and another star, and soon the sky was full of ‘em. But every once in a while a star would get a bit too old and heavy to carry itself

anymore. So, it would go Boom! The core of the star will collapse on itself, and it explodes.” Tony’s arms lift in a wide gesture. “Throwing stardust everywhere. It turns into a supernova, bright and full of color; big and beautiful as it sends remnants of that star all across the universe. And sometimes that stardust will travel millions of miles to gather together in a place the universe decides needs a little more light to chase away the darkness. It creates a giant, colorful cloud called a nebula. Then all that stardust will push together to give birth to a new star.”

“A baby star.” Peter states, with a nod of his head.

“Exactly. But sometimes, not all that stardust is used to make the star, so it travels other places, and it’s used to make planets, and moons. And it was used to create the Earth, the grass, and trees, and little bunnies, and fishies in the lake. Then, one day, the universe decided it needed to use that stardust to make a very special person. Guess who it was.” Tony would always grin, bright and cheery and Peter would grin right back, holding one of his plushies close to contain the warmth and excitement in his chest.

“Me.” He would always whisper in answer.

“Mhm,” Tony would hum, “one day the universe decided to make a very special baby, and gave you to me, my little baby boy. And for the first time in my life, there was light. It knew that I needed a very bright star to chase away all the scary darkness hiding in the shadows. So, I will always be thankful to the stars for giving you to me. My little baby star.”

Peter smiles at the memory, blinking away the last of the tears as they leaked from his eyes. That story always made him feel better. Daddy told the best stories, even if he couldn’t make sense of them most of the time.

Still... It was his last night here. His last chance to look up at the stars and point out each constellation he knew and remember the story his Daddy told about each of them.

Maybe he could see a shooting star again and wish they never had to go away!

And with that final thought he leaped from the bed, throwing the blankets to the floor, and he rushed from his room.

Tony wakes to several harsh kicks to his shin. He grunts in acknowledgement and rolls to his side to try and escape the abuse. It was way too goddamned early for Pepper to be waking him up if it wasn’t an imminent crisis. He had a big day tomorrow that he’s been dreading since he announced the date.

“Tony,” Pepper groans with a tired rasp in her voice. She kicks his leg again.

“Honey,” Tony moans, pressing his face into his pillow before lifting it back up and sighing in resignation. “What is it, love? You got some outlandish craving your dearest husband must go and fetch for you?” He rolls onto his other side to face her and blinks his eyes open. Pepper’s eyes remain stubbornly closed.

“No,” she grunts. “Peter’s up again.”

Tony’s brows furrow and he grunts, letting his eyes slip back closed as he rolls her so his back is to her once more. He didn’t *hear* any crying, but he definitely did hear a heavy thud from down the hall.

“What the hell is he doing?”

Pepper just nudges him again, this time with her hand, and he's pretty sure she didn't mean to grope his ass... but she totally did. "Probably trying to pull out that goddamned telescope you put away... I told you you should have sent everyone home early so he could get his star time in."

"He was having fun," Tony complained, a disgruntled growl building up in his throat as he sat up.

"You started this obsession, Honey, now you can deal with it," Pepper smiled as she settled back into a comfortable position in the bed as Tony dragged himself out of the bed. Sure enough, he caught Peter red handed trying and failing to drag the telescope outside.

"And what do you think you're doing?" Tony asked, trying to make sure to sound stern... he was too tired to actually be upset right now.

Peter leaped in surprise, head snapping to the side to stare up at him. His eyes were wide, tiny hands still grasping the legs of the telescope.

"Just want to see stars," Peter whispered, lip quivering pitifully.

"Bubba, it's late," Tony sighed and gently lifted the child into his arms. "The stars look the same way they did last night, I promise."

Peter leaned his head against his shoulder and wrapped his arms around his neck. "But-but, I wanna make wish so we don' gotta leave 'morrow."

"Ah I see." And okay, that might have broken his heart a little bit. If he didn't have to leave he probably never would. This past month has probably been the best he's ever had. Except for the rare nights towards the end where his imagination got the better of him and he was left a breathless panicky heap on the floor so he wouldn't wake Pepper.

He needs to go back... he needs to get this thing taken care of before it gets out of control and overruns his life. And things need to go back to normal... his kids won't be safe until he does this. So he has to. As much as he hates the idea of going back; he has to. And they have to come with him. There's no way he'd ever be able to rest knowing their across the globe where he can't protect them.

"Well how about this," Tony croaks before clearing his throat and heading back down the hall with Peter still in his arms. "Once we get back home I'll figure out something really fun for us to do together. Just me and you."

"Outside?"

Tony grimaced. "Not at first, Bud. But eventually maybe we can go to the park and you can make some friends your age."

Peter pouted and flopped against his shoulder. Tony took that as the boy wasn't impressed, and he couldn't really blame him.

"Alright fine, you win." Tony muttered under his breath. "You can sleep in Mama and Daddy's bed tonight, deal?"

"Kay."

The next morning... well... it was a bit chaotic. It was only ten in the morning and Tony already had a splitting headache.

It had been enough of a chore getting the boys up and ready to leave. Peter was a bit crabby from being up so late and waking up so early because he refused to skip their early morning ritual. Harley was a bit more pleasant than Peter, but that didn't mean he wasn't a total grump. Even Pepper was in a pissy mood, and okay, he was as well. It was obvious nobody wanted to leave, but y'know, duty calls and all that shit.

They rode in silence to the tarmac, sat in the backseat of the limo. Peter sat curled beside Pepper, looking absolutely pitiful with his blanket wrapped tightly around his shoulders, and Harley didn't look much better, staring out the window like some low quality music video.

Nobody was very pleased with him. So, Tony worked on his phone, texting back and forth with Rhodey to get caught up with all the small things that've been going on while he was away and sipping on the coffee in his travel mug.

So, it came as a bit of a surprise to him when they were met in front of the jet by a tiny goodbye party. He had been expecting Loki to show and deliver something he requested last minute, but not anyone else.

Peter was absolutely thrilled. He screamed in delight as soon as he wedged open the door and immediately threw himself at Dom, who happily gathered him in his arms and kissed him on the cheek before handing the eager boy to Emilia so she could hug him as well.

Tony ducks out of the car with an incredulous smile and shake of his head as a scoff slipped through his lips. "Now what is this?" He chuckles, just as Harley steps out behind him with a big smile, then turns to help Pepper out as well.

"We just had to say goodbye one last time," Dom smiled, pulling Harley in for a tight hug. An engine revs in the distance and Tony turns to watch as Clint and Nat pull into the tarmac behind the limo in one of his Town cars. The pair of spies step out and before Tony even has to tell them to, they start pulling out their bags in the trunk and loading it into the jet.

"I will come visit, I promise, but you must promise to come visit me as well. Maybe after Thanksgiving you come, and I will come for Christmas?" Dom offers, holding Harley by the shoulders and smiling down at him. Both then turn their heads to look at Tony with arms crossed over his chest.

"I'll think about it. You can come whenever though Dom. You know you and Emilia are always welcome." Dom smirks at him, and Harley continues to stare up at him with a pleading look in his eyes.

"Oh don't look at me like that," Tony scoffs. "He hasn't come out to visit *me* in years. You've got a better shot at convincing him than me." Tony smiles.

"I do not like to fly," Dom replies with a sigh. "It is unnatural."

"Oh c'mon. You know you'll have to come once the baby's here," Pepper teased and a smug smirk spreads across Tony's face as he turns his head to look at the man, and Dom frowns at him. "I can't believe I have to use my kids as leverage to get you to visit me."

"New York is a hotspot for trouble Tonio. I prefer not to seek out trouble. I enjoy my peace."

"Whatever you say, pal," Tony chuckles, but he can't help but agree with the older man. If he could get away with staying in Italy for the rest of his life, he wouldn't hesitate. He's loved this place since he was a little boy.

Then a new pair of tires are screeching against the tarmac and Tony turns to spot the silver Town Car pulling up beside his. Thor climbed out of the passenger seat, passing right by him and Pepper as if they didn't even exist and beelining straight to the boys. Gosh that man loved kids, it was ridiculous.

"Stark," Loki called for him, leaning against the roof of the car, driver's door wide open. Tony lifts his brow in acknowledgement. "I brought what you asked for." He gestured towards the backseat and Tony smiled to himself, stepping away from the small family gathering and opened the backseat, holding out his hand towards the person inside.

He had no expectation of her grabbing his hand, he was simply being polite. And he was right. Instead, the young woman slowly stepped out of the backseat and gave him a scrutinizing look. She was watching out of the corner of her eye as Thor greeted the boys. Peter perched on his shoulder, hugging the man's head close to his chest as Harley's trapped beneath the man's meaty arm.

"Ms. Nebula. How great it is to see you again. I have quite the proposition for you." It grabs her full attention and she cocks her head to the side.

"You got anything holding you here in Italy? Family? Debts?"

"My father..." she answers slowly, a scowl flickering across her face. "But I hate him."

Tony chuckles. "Looks like we have something in common... How would you like to come to America with me. I'd like you to continue training under Ms. Romanoff, and I think you'd make a good addition to my team in the States. We're lacking any promising recruits and I think you're just what we need."

Something passes over the girl's face that Tony wasn't expecting. Shock, possibly adoration, he wasn't sure, but it only lasted for a mere second before her cool and calm facade returned in its place.

"I accept." Her chin turns up proudly and she stands straight.

"Alright, well load up," he nods towards the jet behind them. "You bought your go-bag correct?"

"Yes' sir." She holds up a small bag she grabbed from the backseat.

Peter was just a bit fascinated with Nebula. So was Harley, but that one was a given and for completely different reasons. Nebula's presence seemed to help them both forget about their grumpiness from earlier in the morning. The boy's had migrated in her direction after Peter caught word of her name and Harley had been a bit too eager to volunteer to bring the kid over to meet her. So, now Peter was entertaining Nat and Clint, and confusing Nebula by the looks of it while Harley did his best to appear aloof and indifferent.

"So your name Neb'la?" Peter asked, eyes bright with wonder. "You a baby star like me?"

Tony chuckled under his breath, leaning his head back against his seat and closed his eyes. Poor Nebula had no idea how to deal with the attention. He takes a breath in... dreading the events scheduled to occur only a couple hours after the plane landed. This one hearing, although he has confidence in the turnout, he's nervous of what could come of it. This will make or break their future... his kids' future. He'll admit he had thoughts of ditching it altogether, but he needed to do this.

Ugh, how he hated having to be a responsible adult.

He felt a hand grasp his own and squeeze.

“You okay, Hon?”

Tony clears his throat and sits up a bit, blinking his eyes open and faking a calm smile to appease his wife’s worry. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You’re not--” she sounds worried, “you’re not still thinking about... *him* , are you? He’s not-- he’s gone, baby.”

Tony looked at her and shook his head quickly. “No-no, I’m--I’m... no.”

She rubs the back of his hand gently before threading her finger through his and leaning over to kiss his cheek and lift her other hand to comb her fingers through his hair. Then trailing them down to stroke the cheek facing away from her and pulling him in gently to kiss his nose. Tony couldn’t help but close his eyes and chuckle as he leaned into her touch, pressing their foreheads together gently.

“So, it’s the hearing then, hm?”

Tony grunts in acknowledgement and she hums.

“Well, I have the papers from Cho. Everything’s clear on our end. Have you talked to Bruce?” She lowered her voice significantly, “About Richard?”

Tony grimaced then scowled and pulled away. Even the thought of the man filled him with a deep boiling hatred. “No,” he spat through gritted teeth.

“You can’t keep putting it off, Honey. Why don’t you go call him now, while the boys are distracted with Nebula?”

Tony doesn’t want to... but he has to. God, there’s just so much he *has* to do. He doesn’t think he’s ever despised responsibility as much as he does right now, but Pepper was right. He’s been putting off speaking with Bruce, trying to avoid the inevitable frustration of what he’s pretty sure his answer will be. So he gets out of his seat and makes his way to the back of the plane for some privacy. He can feel Natasha’s eyes on his back as he moves, because, well, she’s nosey as all hell.

He dials up Bruce and the man answers after the third ring.

“Tony? You guys are on your way back, right?”

“Yeah. We departed about an hour ago. Have you pieced together the compounds yet?”

Bruce sighed heavily over the phone. “I... I’m close Tony. But Parker’s blood is saturated in so many different drugs that it’s hard to distinguish which elements and mutations belong to what.”

“How many are there?”

“At least seven major compounds. From what I can tell, all of them are either neuro or cardiovascular enhancements. I think he may have experimented a bit with muscle elasticity as well, but it had to be just before Mr. Coulson picked him up. His cells haven’t had the proper time or nourishment to incubate and bond with his muscle tissue, but over this past month as he’s recovered... his cells are beginning to reform.”

Tony rubs his chin in thought. “Do you still need more samples from him?”

“I can’t tell yet Tony.”

Tony growled in annoyance. “C’mon Bruce. I’ve been stringing this guy out for over two months! He pisses me off and I’ve been waiting to kill him for *four* months, Bruce. Four months. I’ve *never* waited that long to kill anybody and I hate making exceptions. *Especially* for him. Do you understand what I’m saying, Bruce?”

Bruce doesn’t seem to appreciate his condescending tone, because he bites back just as hard. “You’re the one that asked me to do this Tony. Keep that in mind. If you want it done right you’re gonna have to use a bit more of your self-control and let me do my job.”

“I have been Banner,” Tony spits out through gritted teeth. “I’ve refrained from killing him a dozen times, and I’ve used every excuse in the book to make myself feel better while you’ve been taking your oh so precious time figuring this out. He’s running out of juicy secrets and people are going to start getting suspicious.”

“You want to help Peter, right?” Bruce asked. Tony didn’t answer because they both already knew the answer. “And you wanna know what Ross’ been having Parker cook behind the scenes, right? Well you need to give me time. These things don’t just magically piece together on their own. I am doing a reverse analysis of seven different hybrid vaccines to rewire them and piece together whatever disease or bio-weapon Parker’s made and is trying to protect himself from.”

Tony sighs. He drags a disgruntled hand down his face. “I *need* this for the trial Bruce. I need it to prove whatever he put into Peter.”

“You can win this without it Tony. What you already have on Parker is good enough, and Cho told me she finished those mock DNA results weeks ago. You’ve got Carter in line. So unless Ross has suddenly become smarter than you overnight, you’re covered.”

“Fine,” Tony grunted. “Just keep working at it... and just so you know... next time I have the inkling to shoot the man in the head, I’m not holding back anymore. You can just skin him and hang him upside down in your lab to drain the rest of the blood from his body to get your stupid samples.”

There’s a heavy silence over the phone. “You of all people should know that’s not how it works Tony. If you want to know if these drugs Richard supposedly gave to your son are toxic or harmful to him, I need to study the way his cell tissue learns to interact with it, and from what I can tell... it’s not harmful, but it’s doing something to his body, and until I know exactly what that is we’ll be left in the dark until Peter begins showing his own symptoms. And by then it may be too late.”

“Y’know. Sometimes I hate how reasonable you are, Banner. Don’t you ever lose your cool?”

“Only when the need calls for it, sir. Now if you don’t mind, I would like to get back to work on this.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks for the update.”

Tony walks down the wide walkway, to the front of the courtroom. He makes sure to hide his discomfort behind the lens of his sunglasses as he slowly inspects the crowd of reporters seated in the audience. The cameras follow him down the aisle, and he represses a growl in his throat. He had given Carter a list of acceptable reporters and publishing companies that were acceptable to stream and report on this hearing... and nearly none were the ones he specified.

“What the hell’s going on?” He whispers into the ear of his lawyer as he takes the seat beside him.

“Mr. Stark!” The young man jumps in surprise, eyes wide through his thick framed glasses as he stares at him as if the man had seen a ghost. “You’re here. I didn’t know if you were going to show.”

“Of course I showed,” Tony growled, “I called the damn trial.” He narrowed his eyes at the man. “You’re not Jimmy.”

“N-no, I’m not sir. My name’s Carl.”

“Are you kidding me? *Carl* ?” Tony lowers his glasses to the tip of his nose and gives him a once over. “What are you, a 60-year-old man?”

“N-no sir,” The young man stutters again. Tony rolls his eyes at him. He can already tell this isn’t going to be going completely in his favor. Well, at least not all that he had expected it to be.

“What happened with Jimmy? I’ve been having him prep all month for this.”

Carl nervously messed with the papers laid out in front of him. “He-he came down with something last minute. I’m--I’m substituting for him. But don’t worry sir! I was the top of my class and I’ve been working with Jimmy on this all month. And I used to work for PR, so I know just what to do to make you look good, sir. I’m completely prepared.”

Tony grunted indignantly, turning once more to look out at the crowd, then over at the team of lawyers lined up at the table to his right... it was going to be a long day.

“When’s Carter getting here?”

Carl gave him a nervous look. “Who?”

“Sharon Carter,” Tony sits up a bit straighter in his seat. “Judge Carter. She’s the judge for this case.”

Carl’s mouth hangs open helplessly as he slowly shakes his head.

Tony’s face grows hot with panic and he slaps his hands on the table with a quiet smack. “Are you kidding me?” He grits his teeth together, hard. A cold shiver tingles down his spine and he reaches for his phone. Something was *wrong* .

He’s just about to dial Rhodey’s number to get someone to come bust him out of here before things escalated to a point he couldn’t back out from, but just as he stood from his chair, a familiar face entered the room and the very annoying voice that accompanied it. It’s not... well it definitely wasn’t what he was expecting and he was definitely regretting his decision to not have a jury of his peers... but he should’ve expected this. Hydra sure knows how to break up a party.

“Mr. Stark,” the man smiles a bit too wide, “I’m pleased to see you decided to join us.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “Stern,” Tony greets. “Last I checked, Judge wasn’t really in your job description.”

“Change of profession you could say,” the man smiled and sat in the chair behind the stand. “What? Were you expecting someone else? President Ross chose me specifically for this case.”

Tony stiffens, but he makes sure to keep his expression neutral as Stern opens the thick manilla folder lying flat on the platform, a smug smile on his lips as he quietly looks over the contents.

Tony leans back in his chair then glances around at the large number of guards stationed around the room. Then he takes a glance into the crowd once more, and now things are slowly piecing together... this was an ambush; a lousy one, but an ambush all the same. And they know he knows, because now Stern was looking up at him, smug smile now matched with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. Tony tips his head in acknowledgement, a bit of praise for a scheme well done and turns to his jittery lawyer. They both knew there was nothing he could do about it right now... This was check... but not checkmate. And if he knew one thing, it was this, he's a *master* at chess, and the only man ever able to outsmart him was buried six feet beneath the ground.

"Call Rhodes," he instructs Carl under his breath.

"What? What's wrong?" Carl's head snaps around the perimeter, completely oblivious to the danger he was in.

"Just call Rhodes," Tony spits through gritted teeth. "Tell him to stand down." He turns his head to look into one of the cameras and subtly shakes his head. "Tell him not to let the boys or Pepper out of his sight." Then he turns back to Carl and narrows his eyes.

"Yes'sir," Carl nods vigorously and fishes out his phone.

"So, Mr. Stark. Now that all the evidence has been presented, would you like to take the stand?"

Tony did *not* want to take the stand.

So, far, things have gone surprisingly well... he wasn't quite sure what to think of it. Either Carl really was a really great lawyer, or Stern and Ross weren't nearly as prepared as they had thought, which only proves Banner's point from earlier. Either way he wasn't about to let his guard down, because he knows as soon as he does, that would be the opportune time to strike. All he knows is his lawyer was more than prepared. In fact, the level of preparedness he showed was borderline obsessive, but that's what Tony pays his guys the big bucks for.

But it seems the constant discrediting of the prosecution's claims were beginning to frustrate Stern. Carl had easily deflected all of the accusations targeted towards Stark Industries, the biggest tech conglomerate based in the U.S, with a simple list of facts. "Well, this potentially "harmful" company provides more than 30,000 jobs in Manhattan alone, in terms of either manufacturing, shipping, and research. Across the states, approximately 1.2 million." Which, yeah, that's a lot. Tony couldn't help but smirk to himself at that one. He's gaining on Apple. "The company who has recently completely eradicated it's weapon manufacturing division to push focus onto things to protect and serve the people of this country in a more peaceful manner. And the same company who has donated millions in funds to various charities and have provided life changing research in terms of medicine and technological advancements. In fact, Mr. Stark himself, and his CEO and wife Virginia are both major sponsors for the Make-A-Wish foundation. So you're saying that all these things are actions of a man that wants to put the very people he is trying to protect, into harm's way?"

"Well, how would Mr. Stark explain the illicit distribution of custom weapons and drugs his presumed crime operations have been dealing with?" Stern had argued.

"And where is your source you are getting your information, sir? When has Mr. Stark ever proven to be doing such a thing? Or are you referring to the accusation pointed towards him from a man who presumably runs the biggest terrorist organization across on Earth? You don't think it might be a bit of a coincidence that Mr. Stark here has been accused, when he is quite possibly one of the most capable and powerful men to help fight against this threat? Or are you referring to the years

of trials and fines that have led to nothing but innocent findings against my client? In fact, he quit providing weaponry for the U.S. government as soon as he picked up on corrupt officials pinning them off to organizations who were using them irresponsibly.”

Stern had gone red in the face at that one and Tony had to muster so much effort not to snort.

It wasn't until they had broached the more sensitive subjects that Tony started getting antsy. He had gone through all the “corrupt company” and “endangering the public” crap before. A million times it feels like, and never once has he been found to be guilty of the accusations. This, though... this was new, and he can't say he isn't a little nervous about it. Carl had provided the papers, but a few models of DNA and signatures on a forged birth certificate weren't enough. He had to take the stand.

Sadly Carl can only save him from so much.

“So, Mr. Stark,” one of the prosecution lawyers started as he stood in front of the bench, “how is it that your supposed son, Mr. Parker, came into the hands of Richard Parker? You claim he was kidnapped... yet neither you or your wife filed a report.”

Tony leaned back in his chair, maintaining a facade of aloofness.

“There is no “supposed” about it, Peter is my son. And his name is Peter Stark, not Parker. Check the papers again if you'd like--”

“My mistake. Now please answer the question”

Tony frowned. “We didn't want the world to know about Peter, or our other son, Harley, because we knew as soon as they did our kids would be in even more danger. Richard knew I was aware of his unsanctioned experiments and developments, so he took Peter to make sure I stayed quiet about it... and y'know, developing that type of biochemical weaponry required a test subject here and there, and the best subject would be someone the world would never have the chance to miss. And he knew I knew that.”

“So how did you get him back? And why after all this time? Why did you wait? Richard filed a missing child report just a few months ago and reports of Peter being his son go back to at least 3 years ago, maybe even further.”

“He took Peter when he was very young and raised him as his own] just to rub it in my face. He forged a birth certificate and everything. So, to the world's knowledge, Peter was very much his son, which only gave him more of an advantage over me when it came to taking him back. He wanted to frame me for a crime that really isn't even a crime. He planned for it... and his plan worked.” Tony shrugged. “Now I am sitting here, facing “consequences” when I was simply just getting back what was rightfully mine.”

Tony has never lied so much as he ever had in that moment. He always made extra effort to be truthful... but sometimes things were bigger than the truth, and lies needed to be told. Because this world was unjust and sometimes the truth just wouldn't cut it.

“*How* did you get your son back, Mr. Stark? And why *now* .”

“I sent a friend of mine... I found out that Richard wasn't sticking to his word... he shot my kid up with so many different drugs he's been testing I'm surprised he's still normal. As soon as I learned what he was doing I threw all caution to the wind and got my son back.”

“Did your mission to get your son back have anything to do with Richard Parker going missing?”

"I hope it did. The bastard probably took off to Europe by now. Once I got my kid back, he didn't have any leverage over me anymore and he knew it. I even have my best guys on figuring what he was working on. It's something we could believe is very harmful to the public and wherever he has stashed his finished samples needs to be found and neutralized."

"We are not here to discuss Mr. Parker's crimes. We are here to discuss yours."

"What crimes have I committed?" Tony scoffed. "Being a caring father? Trying to protect my children? Is that a crime these days? 'Cause last I checked, developing toxic drugs and experimenting with them on innocent children was much more illegal. If anything, I should be getting a medal for turning this guy in. You're welcome America," he stands and holds out his arms, "i just saved you from another potential terrorist! You'll thank me later!"

Stern hits his gavel against the desk. "Mr. Stark! Sit down!"

Tony gives him a side eye, but he slowly sits back down in his seat and the now nervous lawyer begins to pace.

"Mr. Stark. Were you aware of your son's criminal record?"

Tony blanched.

"You've got to be kidding me. He's four."

"I'm talking about your other son, Mr. Stark. Harley."

Tony chuckled. "Oh. You should be more clear, Mr. Fineman. You've gotta work on those transition words of yours. Or maybe try being more specific to avoid confusion--"

"Mr. Stark," he interrupts through a red face, "will you please answer the question?"

Tony pauses and takes a deep breath, because no, he was not aware.

"No, I was not."

He assumed... but he never asked.

The lawyer handed a paper to the judge. "He's been arrested a total of 15 times just in the past year. For being in possession of drugs, unregistered weapons, stealing, and grand theft auto."

Tony whistles at the laundry list of offenses. "Damn. The kid hijacked a car?"

He saw Carl shake his head emphatically, eyes wide in a frantic panic and Tony just sighed in frustration. He supposed now wasn't the time to be cracking jokes. "Ok, listen, the kid wasn't in my care until a few months ago. My wife and I transferred guardianship over to who used to be his adoptive mother when he was just a baby. We weren't in the most stablsh relationship at the time and work was heavy, we didn't want to add a kid to the mix."

"So, now you're harboring a fugitive."

"Hang on now," Tony scowled. "Is he a wanted criminal? No, he's not. He's thirteen! He made some mistakes and had a few run-ins with the law. He had no one to guide him. For the past two years he's been completely on his own, trying to take care of himself. Can you blame the kid for trying to steal clothes and food every once in a while? He was *hungry*."

"So you let your son wander the streets by himself for two years?"

“Well I wouldn’t have let him if I knew about it,” Tony scoffed. “It wasn’t until one of my security guys found him snooping around that I pieced everything together. We were never informed of his adoptive mother’s death. And in the five months he’s been under my care, he’s done nothing but dismantle my tv remotes and blenders to make his harmless little trinkets. He’s a kid now; he’s safe, he’s happy as can be, and he’s got me to set him straight if he ever tries hotwiring another car.”

The lawyer man was slowly losing his edgy confidence, and Stern was not happy about it.

“One last question, Mr. Stark. When were you planning to inform the government of your intended guardianship of the boy’s? It is against the law to harbor minor’s not legally under your care.”

Tony easily hid his grimace. That was one of the only things he didn’t have a way to talk himself out of... but at the worst he may receive a large fine if he can get some sympathy from the public.

“I’ll be honest, I didn’t have any intention of letting the government know. In case you’ve been living under a rock, our dear President, Thaddeus Ross hasn’t been all too agreeable with me the past few months or so. I couldn’t risk having the kid’s torn away from me, especially now that they’re older and I have plenty of enemies more than capable of getting their hands on them and using them against me. So, no, I’m sorry I don’t trust the government with my children at this time, and this whole scenario happening right here is only further proof of that.”

He felt all eyes focused on him. The courtroom was silent, and even the murmuring of the reporters have quieted down to listen to his words.

He answered a few more questions, and by the time he was done, he was more than confident in his odds. He knew Stern had the easy ability to put him in prison forever without so much of a blink, but without him winning the favor and agreement of the people first... there would be too much controversy and far too many questions. And if Tony knew one thing, he knows Hydra isn’t a fan of people asking questions. Because once people start asking questions, they become curious, and being curious makes them dangerous.

Hydra was smart, and if they wanted him locked away, they needed to do a better job at hiding their motives behind actual “judicial” standards.

Things were flying smooth until Stern started getting very frustrated, or maybe scared. Either way, he’s sure the guy was seconds away from either cursing him out or crying.

Just when he was about to stand and demand Stern make his final decision, one of the snot-nosed lawyers stood and made a request that had Tony’s body flinching with a cold panic.

“I feel it is imperative to get more than just one side to the story. If we conclude now, sir, you would be making a decision just based on what Mr. Stark has said and taking his word for it. I think it would be wise to bring in the boys to get their statements as well--”

“No,” Tony immediately argued, shaking his head firmly.

Stern’s head slowly turns and he gives Tony a calculating look before his lips inch into a small smirk. An idea was forming in his head, Tony could tell.

“What was that Mr. Stark?”

“I said no. My boys are not stepping foot in this courtroom.” He keeps his voice stern, and his glare heated, so the man knows he meant business, but that didn’t seem to deter him. It only spurred him on.

“I do believe Mr. Fineman is right, Mr. Stark. The only statements we have is from your side of the story. I cannot make a sound decision without having the full scope.”

Tony sneers, but then his face laxes into a playful smirk as he leans forward, hands braced against the table in front of him. “Fine, I’ll tell you where you can find them... right on up your ass and to the right. So, I’d get going and fuck yourself, if I were you.”

The loud slam of the gavel echoed in the chambers, mingling with the noisy chattering of the audience behind him. “I am holding you in contempt in this courtroom!” Stern yelled. “I will give a warrant to the NYPD to go into your home and take the boys into care of the CPS. They will be held three weeks, a fair amount of time for any Stockholm syndrome you’ve drilled into their brain to diminish. And until then, you will find yourself right where you’ve always belonged.”

Tony’s heart dropped. He felt all confidence and hope immediately drain from his body, leaving him pale and sickly as he felt his throat begin to close. It wasn’t until two pairs of strong hands wrapped around his biceps that he found his senses again.

“You have no right!” He hollered, rearing back to throw one of his captures into the seated audience. “Don’t you touch them!” Hands were on him again, holding him down as he fought them off. He heard Carl’s desperate pleas for him to quit fighting, but all he could focus on was the growing smile on Stern’s face the man was trying and failing to hide. Tony growled from deep within his chest and his entire body seized with a sudden strike of adrenaline and he leaped forward. Only for more hands to join the others and he’s being pressed face first into the table, hands being forcefully yanked behind his back to be cuffed.

The chatter in the courtroom has not evolved into a quiet uproar as the shuttering of cameras overtake his senses. The flashing of bright bulbs and muffled shouts for either his or Stern’s attention had his brain shuffling for any semblance of a thought. All he could think of was

Pepper.

Peter.

Harley.

And god, he knows Rhodey’s been prepping the Tower for this potentiality all month... but this is just going so wrong. So, so wrong. Out of all the time spent worrying... he never spent a minute thinking this might be the outcome.

All he knows is he won’t be spending his time in a nice cozy jail cell... and he hopes to god it’s not true but he’s pretty sure Peter and Harley won’t be spending their time with CPS either. God... why did he have to open his stupid mouth.

He feels a sharp sting start at the base of his spine and curl up to his neck and his entire body seizes with the sharp shock before he collapses heavily against the table again with harsh breaths. But after just a second of recovering he’s back to struggling. He’s not one to go down without a fight.

And he hopes to God Rhodey’s got a plan.

Translations:

Ti Lodo - "Praise to you"

Sono sottomesso a tutti voi - "I submit myself to you"

E io, tu - "And I you"

So, as you've probably already guessed I am by no means a lawyer. So, I was literally just grasping at strings during that last bit there. I tried to tie together everything I could think that needed to be addressed, but it's been so long since I've written actual PLOT that I probably forgot a couple things. So, oh well, I'm sorry. But, yeah...

Thanks for reading y'all! Love ya to pieces XD

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Sorry for another long wait guys...

Hopefully y'all can enjoy this one just a little bit maybe.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“What do you mean it’s “*not working*”?” The older man scowls, watching through the thick window of glass as James Barnes writhed and thrashed against the restraints tying him down to a chair specially molded just for him. His face was red with the strain of his piercing screams echoing around the chambers. A complex pattern of veins bulging from the skin of his neck, and rising up the sides of his face. And the constant reverberation of Barnes’ distressed cries disrupting any semblance of a peaceful silence he typically enjoyed did nothing more than irritate the older man even further.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Reilly scowled sarcastically, crossing his arms over his chest, the badge he wore hanging around his neck pressing uncomfortably against the sensitive part of his forearm. “I’m no scientist. I’m just telling you what they told me,” Then he gestures to the doctors scrambling around the testing room in a rush to quell whatever it was that had their test subject in such distress. “Those are the guys you should be pissing at. They haven’t figured out squat of your boy, Stark’s, little pet project.”

The man scowled, and for a moment Reilly had the sense to regret the words he spoke and the tone he used while addressing the tower of a man. Sometimes it was easy to forget he wasn’t his own Boss anymore, working off his own payroll. And, well, he may now be in a prime position within what could possibly be the most powerful organization in the world, but that didn’t mean he might lose a few limbs for mouthing off at the boss. So, if he was being completely honest, even though the pay and recognition wasn’t near as good... he much preferred his work as a, well... “independent contractor”.

“Get one of them in here then,” the Boss waved his arm in a loose gesture towards the chaotic scene happening in the next room, and Reilly didn’t need any further instruction to know what the man was requesting. He called in the head scientist, a short, stubby man with a furry mustache, yet lacking a full head of hair, and he looked rightfully terrified as he slowly entered the room with a tablet clutched tightly in his hands.

“Sir?” He questioned softly, voice shaking beneath his guise of short lived confidence.

“What’s the delay? This testing and analysis was supposed to be primed and ready weeks ago! I wanted this perfected *before* Barnes so he would have time to adjust before he interacted with Stark.”

“I-I-I’m sorry sir. Barnes’ body keeps rejecting the compound. We-we thought we had it figured out, but without a human test subject, we weren’t aware of all the other factors Stark had hidden in his research in order to make this work. It’s far more complex than any of us have been expecting.”

“What’s so complicated about this?!” The man exclaimed. “You have explicit instructions written out by Tony Stark himself! What more do you need? I hacked Anthony’s damn AI myself to get

you all this research, and you're telling me you can't replicate it even with Stark's personal notes. You need me to sit next to you and walk through it step by step also?!"

"No-no-no sir," he muttered.

"What's your name?" The man snapped, the wrinkled bags under his eyes morphing to accentuate his sharp glare.

"William Riva, sir," he answers.

"Well, *William*, explain to me this issue then."

"It's-- um, Stark... he's developed what seems to be an entirely new branch of science. It functions at first glance as a simple biochemical formula to affect the brain. The math added up and it-it appeared to be a fairly straightforward procedure in order to enhance and manipulate brain function in the prefrontal cortex. But without the addition of the preprogrammed memories and experiences to replace the suppressed cerebral function, the program fails. So when we-we began testing and tried inputting the data... we came across a few-- um... issues."

"Spit it out man!"

"The-the composite requires what appears to be billions of nanorobotic parasites which function according to a very specific and very intricate layer of coding. They-they latch onto most all the neurons in the brain for a flawless adaptation and-and we don't have the time or resources to even begin understanding the foreign coding language Stark developed to create this type of advanced system. And even the development of the parasites themselves is far more advanced than any technology in development yet. The-the only way to plausibly achieve the number needed for full control, the bots would have to quite literally reproduce... it's-it's practically creating a microscopic form of intelligent life. It's *impossible* !" The frustrated scowl slowly evolved into a studious glare. "I want to see Anthony's notes myself." He snaps his fingers and Dr. Riva is quickly handing over the tablet in his hands with Stark's notes on display. He studied them slowly, looking carefully at the complexity of Anthony's study as he takes his time deciphering Stark's admirable thoughts. Slowly, his frown inches into a slight smile, the corners of his lips curving upwards as he releases an incredulous, yet impressed scoff.

"The Ultron Initiative...", he mutters slowly to himself, "what is it you're up to this time, my boy?"

"Rhodey!" Peter shouts, followed by a high-pitched squeal as he darts from his mother's side and across the open room. Taking off from the elevator the moment he spotted the man standing in front of a small crowd surrounding the Common Room television.

The man turned at the waist at the loud exclamation, as do a few others. His large arms were crossed over his chest and his serious frown quirked up into an amused smile as he crouches to the floor. "There's my favorite little Boss man." He scooped Peter up when the kid reached his feet, reaching for him adamantly. "How'd you like your vacation?"

"Sooo much fun," the boy threw his head back to exaggerate his words, and Rhodey chuckled, turning to watch as Pepper approached with Harley, a hand carefully placed over her enormous baby bump. "I misst you dough." Then Peter wraps his arms around Rhodey's neck in a tight hug and the man simply raises his brows in surprise. He and Peter hadn't had much time to bond very much, not as much as he had with Happy or Tony. Although, before Tony and Pepper had officially taken Peter in, Peter had spent many of his afternoons napping on his shoulder while Happy was busy training new soldiers or had simply gotten sick of babysitting the child constantly.

He wouldn't exactly consider that a "bonding activity"... but he'll take what he can get. He pats Peter's back in a gesture to return the embrace and he couldn't help but smirk when he looks up and spots Harley rolling his eyes in exasperation at his little brother's clinginess, though Rhodey's able to make his mouth involuntarily quirks into a smile by pumping his brows obnoxiously.

"You miss me too, short stack? Or should I say... short stark?" He chuckled at his own joke and used the arm not holding Peter to tug the boy into a rough side hug after giving his hair a good ruffle. Peter giggled in delight as he released the man's neck, reaching his small hand down to grab a tuft of Harley's hair where the boy's head was teasingly pinned tightly against Rhodey's chest. And, well, the man nearly goes into cardiac arrest when he feels the teen's arms wrap around his waist to return the loose hug.

What the hell had Tony done to these kids? Maybe he brainwashed them.

He looked up at Pepper, eyes wide, mouthing an exaggerated 'what the hell', both his arms full of non-resistant, cuddly kids. Pepper only smiled, and shook her head in abject amusement.

"Guess what?!" Peter lifted his head from Rhodey's shoulder abruptly and braced his hands against the man's chest so they could look eye to eye. Rhodey startles for just a moment at the sudden burst of enthusiasm.

"What?" He asks.

"Daddy say when he ge's back we gonna p'ay piano 'gether and make fun, tiny 'obots!"

Rhodey's eyes widen again in surprise. Tony hadn't touched a piano since his mother died. *What the hell had these kids done to Tony? Maybe Tony was the one that had been brainwashed.* "Oh really?"

"Yeah, he gonna teach me."

Pepper steps forward and combs her fingers through Peter's hair. "Peter is very excited. It was the only way Tony could coax him to let go of him when we had to leave him back in DC." She smiled at the boy and Peter grinned back cheekily.

"Yeah and guess what else?!" Harley piped up from beneath his other arm, grinning wider than Rhodey ever expected to see on the kid's face. "After Dad promised Peter all that, he told me he's gonna teach me about his cars. He says he's got a new idea and gonna try and build a custom engine *and* frame, and I get to help him! Just us. And, well, I guess if you wanted to come and check it out once in a while that's okay. Tony said you used to love that kinda thing."

And, okay... what the actual hell?

'Dad'?!'

That was new.

He tries not to make a huge deal of it, because by the shocked look on Pepper's face, 'Dad' was a *very* new thing for Harley... and he's positive he would have received quite the earful from Tony by now if he had known about this particular development. *Goodness knows the man was near hysterics when he told him Peter called him Daddy the first time* . Although it didn't look like the kid's noticed he even said it. So, it's probably best not to even mention it, god knows Tony would kill him if he found out he ended up discouraging the kid to call him 'dad' by making him feel all insecure about it.

“And look!” Before he even has time to process *that*, the kid shoves the palm of his hand in Rhodey’s face to show off the scabbed over cut trailing from the tip of his middle finger to the center of his palm. It takes a couple blinks and a small adjustment of his head, for Rhodey to recognize what it was the kid was trying to show him, but once he realized he grabbed hold of the kid’s wrist to keep it in place as he gawked.

“No,” he whispered in disbelief, then looked up at Pepper with a growing smile. Then, as the thought settles, that smile quickly falls into a crestfallen frown. “Without me?!”

Pepper shrugged and chuckled lightheartedly. “Don’t worry Jimmy. I recorded the whole thing for you.”

“I can’t believe you guys didn’t even think to call and tell me,” he squeezed Harley tighter against him and scoffed indignantly. “My own nephew’s coronation, and I wasn’t even invited.”

“Tony really wanted Dom to be there,” Pepper smirked. “It was a bit of a last minute decision. The last initiation Dom has been to was long before Tony, and he was quite excited by the idea of having the opportunity to attend after missing Tony’s. But I’m sure Harley would have loved to have you there as well.” She smiles down at Harley and pets his hair gently with a teasing grin. “Look at that Hon, your uncles are already fighting over your attention.”

Harley rolled his eyes and pushed out of the man’s suffocating hold. “Whatever...”

And just like that, the new affectionate Harley was replaced by the old, trying-to-be-stoic one.

“Fine,” Rhodey grumbled, “but I better be invited to Peter’s.”

“Of course,” Peter giggles. “But Zio Dom’s gotta come too!”

“*-Stark has just arrived at the courthouse.*” The mention of “Stark” had each of their heads turning towards the wide screen TV as the camera pans away from the reporter and random disbursement of NYPD officers in the background, towards the large crowd of paparazzi gathered outside and pushing their way into Tony’s path for a picture and statement as the man puts on his shades and shoulders his way through the suffocating crowd without sparing a single comment as he approaches the door.

“That’s Daddy!” Peter cheered, pointing enthusiastically towards the screen as the shaky camera continued following Tony’s blurry form until he’s through the doors of the courthouse. “Daddy’s on TV.”

“*The court hearing will be held live, as requested personally by Mr. Stark himself, which is scheduled to start here in the next few minutes.*” Then the screen flickers as it changes location to the live footage taking place from inside the courthouse, following Stark down the center aisle of the courtroom to where he sits down beside his lawyer near the front of the room.

“It’s sure is,” Rhodey mumbles absently, his studious frown from earlier making a sudden reappearance.

The crowd of earnest viewers seemed to double in size as workers passed by and paused to stop and watch. Just when the crowd started pushing in on itself, becoming just a bit out of hand, the screen suddenly went dark. A series of surprised, and frustrated mumblings ran through the crowd, and soon the eyes settled on the culprit. Pepper stood, one hand on her hip and the other pointing a slender remote at the large flatscreen with a serious frown on her face.

“Please understand that Mr. Stark would not appreciate important work being put off simply to

watch the footage of a fairly customary occurrence, which he will later debrief whoever needs to be, on whatever needs to be known. There is still plenty of work I *know* he wants finished today. So, please, get back to work.”

Silence settled over the large group. Most of those present were fairly new and had never interacted with Pepper directly before. One looked just about ready to argue, mouth opening to speak, but one simple look from the woman had them backing down in an instant. The young man had turned to Rhodey expectantly, like he couldn't quite believe *she* was the one bossing them around when he was right there. Rhodey scoffed and shrugged his shoulders with a hidden chuckle behind his suppressed grin. That kid was gonna be in for a rude awakening when Pepper's pregnancy was over and she returned to her usual habits of managing, well... just about everything. So, without any more dispute, the crowd slowly dispersed to continue whatever last minute assignment Rhodes had handed out that morning, most of which was part of an overall contingency plan for the “just in case” potentiality...

Then she gently lays down the remote and smiles at Rhodey. “We were all going to watch upstairs.” She glances at Harley for a small moment then back to Rhodey. “I hear from Tony that you finished up a pretty special project while we were away.” She smiles.

“We sure did,” Happy emerges from the scattering crowd with a rare smile on his face, Rogers right behind him.

“Happy!” Peter screeches, vaulting himself from Rhodey's arms. Thankfully the bulky man has fast enough reflexes to catch the kid just as Rhodey was beginning to lose his grip. And Peter, oblivious to the eluded disaster, eagerly wrapped his arms around Happy in a tight hug. Then he leans back to take a look at the tall, muscular blonde man standing beside them. He studies him intently with a cute pout to his lips before his eyes light up in recognition and he gasps.

“Captain Sprinkles!”

The snort that escaped Rhodey's mouth would've been embarrassing any other time, but it was totally worth it. And Harley was laughing so hard, his cheeks flushed. Steve, of course was unamused and he shot both him and the kid a look, but he gave a small wave to Peter anyway.

Happy smiles. “Nice to have you back, guys. Where are Barton and Romanoff?”

“Clint took our stuff upstairs, and Tashi's showing Nebula to her new room,” Harley easily answers. And just as all three men open their mouths to ask the obvious question, Pepper jumps in.

“Nebula is a nice young lady from Italy. She's new, but Tony says she has a lot of promise and he wants her to continue training under Natasha, so she came back with us.”

“Every time Tony leaves the Tower, he comes home with another stray, I swear,” Happy grumbles, as the six of them move towards the elevator.

“Hey!” Harley grunts. Peter lifts his head and looks from Harley to the chuckling adults then pouts his lips and crosses his arms over his chest, exclaiming a sharp and whiny “hey” of his own without quite understanding what he's protesting.

“Don't take it personally kids,” Happy chuckled.

The bickering between Harley and Happy continued until the elevators opened to the penthouse.

Then Peter's sudden screech drowned out any argumentative point Harley was grumbling on about.

The three men were expecting it, but both Harley and Pepper startled as Peter darted from the elevator, into the living room, right to the array of large toys stacked around the room.

“Oh my god,” Pepper gasps. “What the hell guys,” the heat of her words were offsetted by the surprised chuckle as she watched Peter bounce from toy to toy with an eagerness that just sucked up all the negativity in the room.

Rhodey smiles and steps up beside her, giving Harley a gentle push forward too. “There’s stuff over there for you too, Ace.” Harley turned his head to look behind him at the man with wide eyes. Rhodey only gave him a knowing smile and nodded his head towards the Living Room.

“Ha’ley! Look!” Peter shouts, pulling Harley’s attention instantly. “This the robot you wanted!”

Harley’s brows drew together and he took several eager, yet tentative steps towards the colorful array of, what looked to be a window display for one of those rich people toy stores in the movies.

“Oh my god!” He shouts as soon as he spots the “toy” Peter’s pointing at. “Is that?” He rushes forward and falls to his knees in front of it, hands lifting to touch it, but instead end up hovering centimeters away from brushing against the red metal casing around the arm.

“See! To’d you to ask Daddy you wan’ed it.” Peter pokes the metal arm, pushing his face close as he examines it with squinty eyes and a scrunched nose. “You let me p’ay with it sometimes?”

Harley’s still a bit lost for words and his head turns back to stare at Rhodey. “How did you-- I never told anyone but Peter. And-and this is...” “he turns to stare back at the industrial arm. “This is legit! Oh my god! This thing is thousands of dollars! I-I just wanted that knockoff.” He was distracted once more when Peter discovered another object to grab the young teens attention.

Pepper turned her head to look at Rhodey, where the man, as were the two others, stood proudly as they watched the kids fanboy over the plethora of very, *very* expensive toys. “This isn’t the surprise I was expecting.”

Rhodey wears a wistful smile. “Tony didn’t want today to be all about the trial. They needed a distraction from the stress, especially Harley.” Then he turns to her with a grin. “Don’t worry, Pep. He didn’t forget about you; Tony’s got a surprise for you too.” And just like that Phil Coulson emerges around the corner from the kitchen with a large bouquet of flowers in one hand and a dark jewelry case in the other, a smug smirk on his face as he approaches. And then Sam Wilson came next, struggling, but still somehow able to carry in the largest teddy bear Pepper had ever seen in her life.

“Teddy Bear?!” Peter gasps when he sees it.

And then he nearly tackles Wilson.

Pepper’s hand lifts to cover her mouth as she watches Wilson’s stumble to the ground, covered by the teddy, with Peter lying on top of it’s fluffy stomach, squeezing it in a tight hug. “It looks to be more a present for Peter than for me,” Pepper chuckles, glancing over at Harley, who was completely disinterested as he started unboxing one of the new high-tech drones, customized with the SI logo emblazoned on the side.

“Tony did all this?” Pepper finally asks.

Rhodey shrugs, watching as Happy comes over to help lift Peter and the bear off of Sam so the man could get off the floor. “Well, I mean, don’t give him all the credit. It was his idea, but we picked out a lot of the stuff ourselves. Although, he did pick this one out specifically for you.” He

nods down at the jewelry box Coulson was holding out to her. Pepper took it in her hands, an unbelieving scoff escaping her mouth as tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. And, again, she was gasping in disbelief for what felt like the fifth time in the past ten minutes as she opened it. She covers her mouth and now the tears slip through. It was a beautiful diamond encrusted necklace with a small star pendant woven between two interlocking rings. She'd had an eye on this particular piece for a good two months. It hadn't been something she *needed*. No one ever really *needed* a \$90,000 necklace. And goodness knows she already had enough jewelry, so she had never bothered to go through with buying it... but of course her husband was the most perceptive and thoughtful man in the world, so here she was.

"How in the world did he know? I never told him about it."

"He has his ways Pepper," Rhodey chuckles. "You should know that better than anyone."

"How did he know though?" Harley piped up from the Living Room, still a little dreamy-eyed. "I never even told JARVIS about any of this."

"Well isn't JARVIS hooked up to your phone?" Happy gave him a look as he steadied the stuffed bear and Harley nodded slowly. "And did you happen to use that phone to 'look' at this stuff?"

Harley's mouth fell open, then his gaze turned to the ceiling. "You damn little snitch!"

"Harley!" Pepper scolded, but the reprimand was overridden by JARVIS's snarky response.

"Don't act as if you are not pleased with the turnout of events Master Harley. I was doing both you and your mother a favor... and your brother, but it is quite simple to please him."

Rhodey chuckled, Peter laughed while he nods enthusiastically in agreement, and Pepper couldn't bite down her grin.

For a day that was supposed to be hellish and stressful... things were sure turning out alright. Tony apparently knew exactly what he was doing. Goodness knows the boys' grumpy attitudes about having to come back home has disappeared completely.

"We do have one more special surprise for you, Harley." Rhodey announces, then he turns to address Pepper with a whisper "This one you are well aware of, don't worry."

"Really?!"

Rhodey nods, and gestures for Harley to follow him, arm extended as he walked. Then once Harley joined him, he lowered his arms over the kid's shoulders so he could reach around his head to cover his eyes with his large hand. "Wait. Where are we going?" The kid asked as soon as Rhodey's hand landed in its place.

"That would ruin the surprise."

Everyone follows them down the hall which leads towards the bedrooms, and Rhodey stops at the door opposite of Peter's. The door that had once led to the messy guest room/room Tony used for storage. Steve opens the door for them and Rhodey lifts his hand away from Harley's eyes.

"A room?!" Harley exclaims, his jaw dropping as his eyes skirt over the large room.

"Not just any room," Pepper corrects, arm replacing Rhodey's around the boy's shoulders. "It's your room now."

Peter pushes his way through, dashing past them all, through the door and immediately leaping onto the large queen bed at the center of the room, comforter a bright red with grey sheets. Two windows flanked either side of the bed, and the wall was painted in an artistic flow of red white and black to contrast against the other grey walls.

“Look Ha’ley! Look’it!” Peter bounces off the bed and dashes to the dresser where a variety of cool little knick knacks are displayed on top. Harley steps into the room, heart blooming and chest warmer than it’s probably ever been.

...then something particular catches his eye.

“Is that?!”

He rushes towards the large desk in the corner of the room. He grabs the glass case boxed around a mint condition baseball with at least twenty signatures scrawled across the face. “This is--” the words get caught in his throat, the tension being released with a muffled squawk. “This is signed by Tom Seaver! Oh my god! Oh my god! Ed Charles! Rod Gaspar?! This is-- this is... this is a ball from when the Mets won the World Series in 1969!”

“Ok, wow. Nerd Alert,” Wilson whistled, only to be elbowed in the gut by Steve. Then they leave to give the family some privacy.

“I didn’t know you liked baseball sweetheart,” Pepper hums stepping into the room, and giving the space a momentary once over herself as she approaches Harley at his new desk. She wraps an arm around him and he startles for a moment as he snaps his head up to look at her.

“I-I mean...I-I’ve never told anyone.” He looks back down at the glass case. “My mom took me to one of their games once... and-and I just... I liked it.”

Pepper smiles sadly and pulls Harley close, kissing the side of his head and running her fingers through his hair. “Maybe Dad and I will take you and Peter to a game when things cool down. And you know your father, he doesn’t do anything half-hearted. So, we’ll get a nice air conditioned box, buffet, and you can meet all the players in the locker room.”

Harley grins, starting down at the ball. Then Peter comes wandering over, lifting his hands as if to grab onto the fragile glass box, fingers wiggling adamantly for Harley to let him see it. Harley hesitates to let him take it and Pepper notices his apprehension. So, just before Harley’s about to give in and hand the delicate case down to Peter and his insistent grabby hands, Pepper gently takes Peter’s hands in hers and pulls them away. “Peter, Honey, that’s Harley’s, and it’s very fragile--”

“Excuse me, Wha’s that?” Peter asks, pointing over at the glass case in Harley’s hands, as Pepper gently leads him over to sit down on the bed.

“That’s a glass case to hold a very special baseball, and it can break really easily. It’s not a toy. So you need to *ask* your brother before you touch and play with his things, okay? Some things he may not want you to mess with because it’s not meant to be played with, do you understand?”

Peter pouts, but he nods his head slowly. “Yeah, i guess.”

Then Pepper looks up at Harley as the boy gently places the glass display back in its place.

“And Harley, that means you don’t have to feel obligated to let Peter mess with your things okay. This is your room and these are your things. Peter has plenty of his own toys, isn’t that right Peter?”

“Yeah,” Peter sighs dramatically.

“Don’t worry Peter,” Harley smiles, “I’ll let you come in and play with my things sometimes.”

“Yay!” He grins, but then his smile morphs into a serious frown as if he were about to lecture the older boy, “but not the glass case wit’ da ‘pecial ball, right?”

Harley laughs and nods his head to show his agreement.

Then Rhodey steps into the room, and Harley looks up to find that everyone else had left and his doorway was empty and now it was only the four of them. “Glad to see you like your room kid. I’ll admit, when JARVIS suggested we get you that ball, I was a bit skeptical, but I’m glad he was here to oversee our amazon shopping.”

Harley rushed forward to hug him tight around the waist. “Thank you,” he whispers, eyes squeezed shut as he does his best to tamp down on the urge to vibrate in pure ecstasy. Rhodey pats his back, one hand lifting to affectionately ruffle his hair.

“You’re more than welcome kid... when your dad called and said you kids were having such a ball away from home, I just had to make sure we had enough leverage to keep you all here. Goodness knows we’d miss the hell out of you kids if y’all moved. And plus, I had to compete with Dom for that favorite uncle title.”

Harley pushed away with an amused scoff. “Whatever.” He swiped at his eyes then turned to look back up at the ceiling and addressed the AI he knew was listening. “How’d you know JARVIS?”

“Well, sir, when your search history mostly consists of stats and highlight reels after scheduled New York Mets games, it wasn’t very difficult to assume.” Harley rolls his eyes at the snark. “I also ensured you had a custom Mets jersey and memorabilia in your closet.”

Harley grinned and now it was Rhodey who rolled his eyes. “C’mon guys, the hearing’s supposed to start soon. We’ll check the rest of this out later.”

“Oh,” Harley’s smile falls into a frown. “I almost forgot about that.”

When they made it back to the living room, a couple more people had joined the group, and most of the toys had been moved from the center of the room and off to the side to be sorted through and put away later. They were all gathered in the living room, the television already on.

The large couch was left open for them. Pepper and Rhodey took their seats on the sofa, Harley sitting between them as Peter was off milling through the pile of toys once more. Happy stood behind the couch, arms crossed over his chest, flanked on both sides by Allen and Sam as they all silently watched the news coverage on Stark Industries, Tony’s public perception and the many different potentialities of what could come of this trial while the world waited for what could possibly be the most anticipated court trial in years. Natasha sat in an armchair adjacent to Pepper, one leg gently folded over the other. Coulson and Clint stood behind her, Phil with his hands folded professionally in front of him as he usually had them. Bruce had shown up as well, looking particularly put off and uncomfortable, but that wasn’t unusual, he always seemed a bit antsy about something. Steve was lingering at the back of the room.

Things remained fairly low key as they waited for the trial to get started, and nobody but Rogers seemed genuinely worried about the hearing, but the man was a worry wart so that didn’t mean anything. Mostly, everyone was just making jokes about stupid assumptions and predicitions the reporters were making as they sat around the table and “discussed”. Once and awhile, the stream

would return to the live coverage inside the courtroom. Rhodey could tell that Tony was nervous, his spine was too erect and he kept his hands carefully hidden as he waited patiently for the proceedings to begin.

It wasn't until the judge walked through the backdoor of the courtroom that Rhodey began to share that anxiety. He stood abruptly on his feet and he felt his muscles contract and seize with panic, all amusement and nonchalance was sucked from the room.

"What the hell?" He whispers under his breath. "Where the hell is Sharon?!" He spins around and glares. "Allen, what the hell is going on? You were in charge of taking care of the judge."

The young man stuttered nervously. "I-I-I don't know sir. I-I-I don't know."

Happy's arms fall from his chest and he takes a step forward like he was readying himself to somehow rush through the screen and bust Tony out of there himself. "That's Senator Stern, what's he doing--"

"Exactly my point," Rhodey snarls, glancing back at the livestream. "He's on the list."

That's when Pepper stands. "What list?" She narrows her eyes, gently pushing Harley's hands away from her when he tries pulling her back down onto the couch.

"It's a list of people JARVIS and Tony can link back to Hydra. He's at the top of it." He juts his finger at the television. "We need to get him out of there. Phil, I'm gonna need your guys, and Romanoff, I want you to--"

"Rhodes!" Happy interrupts, nodding emphatically back at the screen.

And Rhodey turns his head to look, just in time to lock eyes with Tony through the screen, staring behind him at the camera like he *knew* he was watching. And, it was barely discernible, but he slowly moved his head back and forth, shaking his head in a silent instruction to stand down, like he *knew* what he was planning to do...

Rhodey growled, nostrils flaring, and it wasn't the first time he was tempted to ignore Tony's orders and do what he thought was needed... but he listens. And he slowly sits back down on the couch, perched anxiously on the edge so he was ready to leap to his feet as soon as it was needed. His gut didn't feel good about this.

Natasha matched his body language, waiting for his orders. "Rhodes?"

Rhodey glanced at her for just a moment, then turned back to the screen. He can't miss anything, just in case Tony feels the need to change his mind... "We're standing down... for now." Then he feels a tiny hand tug on his pants and he suddenly remembers the kids were also in the room with them to witness his panicked outburst. He looks down and Peter's there at his feet, looking up at him with big watery eyes as the boy slowly pulls himself into his lap in a silent request for comfort.

"Daddy okay?"

"Yes, he's going to be just fine." Rhodey lies easily through his teeth, wrapping his arms around the boy to hug him close to his chest. He looks over at Harley, finding the boy's face just a bit more pale and sullen than it had been only a few moments before. And Rhodey turns back to the screen, a deep sense of dread settling over him. More like a-a sense that this is not going to be turning out as flawless as everyone had originally predicted.

“Maybe you kids should go watch a movie on the TV in your parents room.” He suggests, locking eyes with Pepper across the couch in a quick shared look of agreement and understanding.

“No,” Halrey answers firmly, crossing his arms over his chest. It wasn’t exactly out of defiance, but resolute determination.

“C’mon, kid, let’s not do this right now--”

“No, I’m not leaving.”

“Harley, Honey, I don’t think it’s the best idea for you and Peter to--” Pepper tries, laying a hand on his shoulder, but Harley jerks away from her.

“I said no,” he spits hotly. “I have every right to be here and know what happens. I am not a fragile child and you need to stop treating me like I am. I’m his son now, so I’m *staying* .”

The words slowly settled heavily on all ears in the room, leaving an uneasy silence among the group. Peter watches his brother anxiously.

“Peter shouldn’t be in here,” Rhodey begins to reason after a couple moments, “and he can’t be left alone Harley.”

“Why do *I* have to be the one to leave. There are plenty other adults in the room that are responsible enough to keep him company.”

Rhodey’s mouth opens to deliver a harsh retort, but then Clint steps out from behind Natasha’s chair and speaks up before the argument can escalate any more and cause even further distress to Peter.

“I can take him back to his room, and we can bring some of those new toys he got and test ‘em out, huh?” The end of the offer was directed at Peter, himself, who shyly smiled up at Clint and nodded in agreement.

Rhodey hesitates, he didn’t know Barton very well. He was new, and was known for a practically perfect track record in his career as a spy and skilled assassin. But, again... so did half the men and women he associated himself with on a daily basis. The man had also spent the last month as part of the Starks’ private security detail, in very close proximity to Tony, Pepper and the kids. If he had any ulterior motives, he had plenty of opportunities to act on them this past month. And Peter seemed to adore him... as he did most everyone else, and Pepper didn’t appear to have any objection to it. So, he stood with Peter, ready to hand the boy off to the world class assassin.

He felt his phone buzz in his pocket just as Peter happily fell into Clint’s arms. He fishes it out of his pocket and glances over the display to see Carl the lawyer calling him. Then he turns back to the television screen to see that sure enough, the man has his cellphone pressed to his ear.

Rhodey doesn’t hesitate any longer to answer the call and press it to his own ear.

“*Mr. Rhodes?*”

“That’s me,” Rhodey answers with a stressed rasp. He listens to Carl stutter through the instructions Tony had given in a quiet whisper, and Rhodey can’t help but let his eyes flicker up towards Clint waiting idly by the collection of toys across the room as he carefully helped Peter pick out whichever toys he wanted to take back to his room.

Rhodey’s hand lifts to rub his jaw while he carefully watches Clint interact with Peter. He didn’t

know if it was stress or contemplation, but either way he had quite a bit of difficulty deciphering the muddled feelings in his head. It wasn't until Barton actually made move to leave the room with an armful of toys that he held up a hand in a silent gesture to stop him.

He doesn't say a word for the next couple seconds as he listens to the rest of the instructions Carl is relaying to him.

"I understand," he eventually answers, a growl pulling from his throat. "And keep Mr. Stark from doing anything stupid please." The call ends and he looks up at Clint with a hard look.

"I changed my mind." He holds out his hand to Peter, and Clint gives him an odd look, as does Peter, but the toddler takes the proffered hand anyways and Rhodey pulls him back a good three steps away from Clint before turning to look at Happy. "Go get his headphones and tablet, Happy. He's going to be staying in here."

Pepper catches his arm. "What's going on?" She asks. As Happy leaves, Rhodey bends down to whisper in her ear.

"Tony doesn't want you three alone with anyone but me or Happy." He places a hand on her shoulder and gives her a chaste kiss on the cheek. Pepper grips his hand tightly. "It's okay, nothing to worry about, just a precaution for now."

"Is something going on?"

"I..." Rhodey pauses, unsure of that answer himself. "We-we don't know. We have a strong argument... and-and as long as he can win over the public, the odds increase. I think we have a strong chance, but just in case... we need to take all precautions necessary."

She nods firmly. Face stoic. "I understand."

"I feel it is imperative to get more than just one side to this story. If we conclude now, sir, you would be making a decision just based on what Mr. Stark has said and taking his word for it. I think it would be wise to bring in the boys to get their statements as well--" Harley's heart seizes as the words fall from the DA's mouth. Just the thought of having to step foot in that courtroom-- although he'd do it in a second if it meant protecting Tony-- had him panicking.

Tony seemed to feel the same about it...

"No," He immediately argued, shaking his head firmly. And Harley hated him for it... the man putting himself at risk just to keep him from doing something that made him slightly uncomfortable, because really... the court wouldn't need Peter. He could do it himself and that would appease them. He knows Tony *knew* that.

Harley quickly looked between his mother and Rhodey, gauging their reaction and... well... he supposes it's very reasonable to be worrying right now about Tony's outright refusal to the simple proposition. Things had been going so *well*. And he's been listening to the adults talk during the hearing, pretending he was too transfixed by the trial playing on the television to be bothered by their whispered discussions... Hydra... Stern, they were practically one in the same. He was looking for any opportunity, any excuse, to take Tony away. Anything that could be justified in court... any way to lawfully excuse this to the thousands-- *millions* -- of supporters Tony's assembled on his side over the years.

"What was that Mr. Stark?" He hears Stern sneer, and Harley turns his head just in time to catch the menacing smirk on his face.

*“I said **no** . My boys are not stepping foot in this courtroom.”* Harley’s throat spasms, keeping the strangled choke festering in his throat.

“Dammit, Stark,” he hears Rhodey sneer under his breath.

“I do believe Mr. Fineman is right, Mr. Stark. The only statements we have is from your side of the story. I cannot make a sound decision without having the full scope.”

Oh no. Harley felt his chest growing so tight it was hard to breathe, his heart stumbling over it’s own fast paced rhythm. He can’t tear his eyes away from Tony’s face as the man’s sneer slowly fades into a coy smirk. Harley’s seen him make that face before... and oh god this isn’t what was supposed to happen! Tony was supposed to come back! He was supposed to come back to them!

He closes his eyes and prays Tony wasn’t about to do something so stupid.

Apparently God wasn’t listening to him at that moment, because it doesn’t work.

“Fine, I’ll tell you where you can find them... right on up your ass and to the right. So, I’d get going and fuck yourself, if I were you.”

“Tony,” Pepper growls, shaky hand lifting to her mouth to muffle her distressed cry.

“What the hell is he doing?!” Rogers yells at least two octaves above his usual , stumbling further into the room and bracing his hands against the back of the couch. “He’s going to be held in contempt--”

The exclamation was just in time to match up with the loud slam of Stern’s gavel. *“I am holding you in contempt in this courtroom!”* Stern yelled. *“I will give a warrant to the NYPD to go into your home and take the boys into care of the CPS. They will be held three weeks, a fair amount of time for any Stockholm syndrome you’ve drilled into their brain to diminish. And until then, you will find yourself right where you’ve always belonged .”*

“No!” Harley screamed, leaping to his feet. “Nonono!”

Rhodey’s leaping up right after him, dropping Peter onto the couch in his place. The little boy startles slightly, headphones falling lopsided on his head and his tablet falling from his hands and onto the couch. Just in time to look up at the TV and hear Tony’s loud exclamation as guards from all sides rush forward to restrain him.

“You have no right!” He hollers, *“ Don’t you touch them!”*

Guards throw him down onto the table.

“Daddy?” Peter whimpers.

The TV flickers black just as Tony throws the first guard into the crowd with a guttural shout then tackled back to the table as his body seizes from the taser pressed near his sternum, and Harley head snaps around the room, looking for the culprit, but he finds none. Everyone looked just as startled and confused as himself.

“Master Peter is in distress.” JARVIS answers simply. “Mr. Stark is currently being detained. So, I suggest you begin to develop a plan of action before things get too far out of hand.” Harley turns to Rhodes, expecting the man to know exactly what to do and start spitting out instructions to fix this mess.

He's stiff, but there's a plan forming in his head, Harley can tell, and he wants to help.

But before any more words can be spoken, Rhodes is finally jumping into action.

"Hogan, get everyone ready. Get them at their stations! Now!" He, along with Happy rush to the elevator. "We do *not* engage. They've got agents outside--"

"Sir, a SWAT team has forced their way into the building," JARVIS interrupts.

Rhodey halts. "Shit!"

Harley moves forward. "Rhodey," he starts with only a small waver in his voice... just when he finally thinks he has a real dad... it's torn away. Maybe it's a sign...

But he can't let himself think like that just yet. They've still got some time and he wants-- no, he *needs* to help fix this. "I can help."

Just as he speaks, an alarm from above blares through JARVIS' speakers and a bright light in the corner flashes red, once, twice, three times before the light simply remains illuminated.

Rhodey's disoriented, as is most everyone else. Natasha, Phil, and Clint were long gone, having taken the stairs in their rush to make it back to their own agents and debrief them on the extent of the situation and review their undercover rolls during the infiltration. Happy's calling for him, waving him to hurry and follow, but Rhodes is still staring at him.

"Harley," he starts, a pained look in his eyes as he gives a slight shake to his head.

"I can help..." Harley says again. He steps away from Pepper, because she's grabbing his arm and pulling him back towards the couch with a stern "*no*". "I'm ready."

"I'm not..." Rhodey pauses, then grimaces and growls in frustration as he stalks towards him. He grabs Harley's hand and shoves something hard and cold into his palm, larger hand enveloping his smaller one. "You keep them safe. You understand?" Then the man looks over at Pepper, locking eyes. "You've got... you've got your knives just in case?"

She nods, and he turns back to Harley with wide eyes strained with the obvious effort to try and hide the underlying fear.

And Harley stares back up at him, as Rhodes returns an uncertain smile. He lifts his free hand to clasp the side of Harley's jaw in a rough gesture to try and communicate reassurance. "Okay. I'll be right back. I promise. Just hold the fort down till I do, alright? I gotta go do a manual override to redirect security systems in the Tower, alright? Stay safe." And with a final clap, he releases Harley and jogs over to Happy who's holding open the elevator for him, joined by Rogers and Allen. Leaving Harley alone in the penthouse, facing the elevator, Pepper cradling and rocking a distressed Peter on the couch behind him, a gun in his hand, and the siren still blaring from above.

He has to protect his family...

And this time he will not fail.

Waking wasn't the gradual process as he usually experienced it. No, this time it was a harsh jolt of panic spurring him upright so quickly he felt something in his lower back snap, a painful sting pulses through him and he bites down on a pained cry as he slowly adjusts his position. He grunts, squeezing his eyes shut to try and concentrate. His mind is blank... He has no recollection of what

had happened before now to land him in this moment. He felt another sharp pain which seems to stem from a prickling ache in his chest. He groans from deep within his throat. Then he felt his stomach twist violently, and it wasn't until his body instinctively rolled to the side that he vomited up any remaining contents of his already empty stomach onto the tiled floor.

The painful retches form a tight coil in the pit of his stomach, and the growing nausea doesn't calm even as his body spasms over heavy dry heaves. Then, after what seems like hours, it finally stops... he breathes heavily, sweaty palms bracing his trembling body to hover above the floor, above the blood-stained sick puddled beneath him. His skin is slick and shining with a cold sweat as he lifts one shaky hand to pull down his face and rest at the base of his neck, slightly curling around his collar in a subtle move to feel both his pulse and his heaving breaths as they push his chest up and down.

Then he pauses, eyes squinting in confusion as he concentrates on the realization of another observation. *His shirt is missing.*

He glances down at his bare chest as he slowly pushes himself to collapse back onto his ass. His scars are reddened and irritated, and he runs a slow finger along the lines of pale skin. Then he looks up and fights to try and piece together these small details, but he can't. And he can't even seem to get angry about it! Because he can't even begin to process *why* he should feel angry even though he knows deep down he should be. His head feels... misty? He's not sure if that's an accurate description to the odd feeling, but the lights above him are bright and he can't glue together a single coherent thought. His hand slowly falls over the indented scar on his sternum and he stares down at his lap. He's wearing a pair of loose grey sweatpants, he notices. He slowly pinched a strip of loose fabric on his thigh. *Where did these come from? Where was he? What happened to him?*

Frustrated, and exhausted as his brain scours any memory or thought he could grasp onto, but something's suppressing him, something has a hold of his mind and the further his consciousness reaches, the further his brain pulls, waning his energy and consciousness into a slim line of almost nonexistence.

He coughs, hand going to his neck. It felt like a razor was skinning the inside of his throat as he coughed up globs of blood into his open palm. He stares at the palm of his hand, at the blood, and he frowns. Then he looks up. His vision has cleared, and he quickly takes advantage of the momentary coherence to case his surroundings. There's a cot at the corner of the room, contrasting against both the white tiled floor and the grey stone walls. There's a small black camera stationed at the corner of the ceiling and Tony narrows his eyes as he stares into the lens with a grave scowl.

He's not all that confused anymore. He may not quite remember all the details leading up to this moment, but he's been kidnapped enough times to know the signs.

So, he slowly stumbles to his feet, willing away the dizzy, discolored blobs obscuring his vision. His gut twists again but he pushes down the nausea, using the years of practice suppressing his bodily functions. He heads for the door, eyebrows drawing together as he falls against it in a heavy lump of disoriented limbs, hands feeling around the cold metal to feel out the integrity of the frame and the door itself. When that avenue leads to no promising results, he surveys the room again, checking for any openings or potential tools he could make use of... there's nothing.

The vents for air circulation were nothing more than small slits in the ceiling. The door seemed quite literally blast proof, functioning on an old fashioned lock and key, and bars and chains from the outside he's assuming. No tampering to be done there. He growls in anger, ignoring the painful scratch of his dry throat.

“Crap,” he groans, voice thick and scratchy. He limps over to slump on the nasty cot. He could feel the blockage around his mind slowly wearing thin.

He makes a list of what he knows so far.

He’s been drugged, and kidnapped. And he no longer has a shirt...

Then he makes a list of what he needs to know.

Who took him? Why? Where? And what happened to lead up to this *fantastic* outcome. And why the *hell* was it so cold in here?

He groans in frustration and slowly kneads his forehead with his fingers as he slowly prods at his mind. He’s had practice working with memory suppressors before, and by golly, it’s a shitton of work and concentration to fight against them, but it can be done... Slowly, the memories coalesce into a full picture. It pieces together bit by bit, spiking his heart rate that much more after each detail slots together.

Stern. Hydra. Court. Trial. Contempt. Warrant. CPS. And soon, his confusion redirects into an all-consuming jumble of panic and anger.

If Hydra makes it into the Tower... and they take the kids under the face of the CPS... gosh he doesn’t even want to think about it.

He rushes to the metal door and slams against it with a guttural scream. “Whoever the hell’s out there better get their sorry ass in here so I can fuck you up! You hear me?!” He slams his fist on the wall and his stomach does a fancy somersault in his gut. “I wanna talk to whoever’s in charge! Grow some balls and show me your face you bitch!”

Then an unfamiliar sensation sparks alive in his throat, and his hands fly up to wrap around his neck as his eyes bulge from his skull in the strain to pull in a breath. He croaks, feeling the illusioned agitation crawl up from the bottom of his gut, and up his throat until all he could feel was a very real lump growing and blocking his airway.

He collapses on the floor, choking and gagging around the blockage as blood pours from his open mouth in crimson rivulets. And next thing he knows, a stinging jolt seizes the rest of his body and it’s dark once more.

From the observation room, two men stand watching Stark convulse through the video cameras. The older man’s thumb pressed down heavily on a small button on the cylindrical device in his hand. Then Stark’s form goes limp, limbs tangled oddly together on the floor as the man finally releases it with a disgruntled hum.

“He woke up early, Reilly.” He stated simply, eyes never straying from the wide screen.

“I’m not sure how,” Reilly shrugged with a shake of his head. “We dosed him up pretty good.”

“Hmm,” the silence continued before the man spoke again. “I’m going to take my leave Benjamin. I expect a full report of the day’s results by this evening. Including a detailed report on Barnes and any progress that’s been made.”

“Of course,” Reilly nodded. “When should I get him set up in the chair?”

“Once your brother gets here,” the man mutters in answer. “I want Parker to work with William

before he goes to Anthony, he shares a close profession with Stark, and he may be able to clear over any things I may have missed. Then afterwards, proceed as planned... but do make sure your dear brother doesn't go overboard. I am not afraid to kill him if I need to."

"I'll keep him in line," Ben promises with a resolute nod of his head.

"See that you do."

There's a small pause as the man packs up his few things to get ready to leave, but before he can make his exit, Ben speaks up at the last minute. "You know sir, I wouldn't mind dealing with Stark myself. I have much more experience in this type of thing than Richard."

The older man fixed him with a stern look. You know you can't Reilly. Anthony can't know your face. Your identity can't be compromised before Phase two is even set into motion. Your time will come, just have patience."

"Yes' sir."

"Harley! Mrs. Stark! Where are you?!" Allen rushes into the penthouse, panting and coughing as his eyes skimmed over the empty room.

"Allen?" Harley steps out from around the corner, the gun Rhodey had given him clenched tightly in both hands. "What are you doing up here? Where's Rhodey?"

Allen breathed a loud sigh of relief and rushes forward. "Listen," he huffs quickly. "Rhodes and Hogan have been arrested. The FBI is swarming the place as we speak and it won't be long until they'll be able to compromise JARVIS' systems. He's already diverted all focus and power to maintaining security protocol, but it won't last long. So you need to get your mom and brother quickly. I have to bring you down to the safe room in the basement."

Harley's breath picks up. "Are you- are you sure?"

"You know you can trust me kid. It's just me," Allen mutters softly, grasping both his shoulders. "I'm always in your corner, you know that. You've got to trust me. We don't have much time, I need to get you three to safety."

Harley's nods quickly. "Ok-ok. Lemme just go get them. They're in the master bedroom."

Allen grabs his elbow to stop him. "Wait. Give me your gun. I lost mine in the fray and you're gonna have to carry your brother so he doesn't fall behind."

Harley quickly hands it over to him, nodding emphatically the entire time. "Yeah-yeah, I'll be right back." Then Harley's rushing off down the hall, leaving Allen alone to wait for him.

The man smiles smugly as he watches the kid disappear into the room, and he chuckles under his breath as his smirk grows.

"Stupid kid."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading guys. Lemme hear your thoughts, I love hearing from you.

Ciao!

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Yes I know it's been too long, and yes I know I'm the worst person ever for leaving on a cliffhanger like that, and yes I know, I'm terrible to come back with such a terrible update, and yes I know you all will hate me after reading this...

Now that that's all out of the way, here it is. And um... fair warning. There's quite a bit of angst and some fairly graphic scenes so tread lightly.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He doesn't know how long he's been locked in this room. It feels like weeks, but he hasn't been able to sleep and the days only seem to drag on... so he supposes his concept of time may very well be skewed. There's been no word from anyone. He's been alone, his own terrifying thoughts gnawing away at any lingering peace until a numb, void pit is all that's left in his gut. Several times he wonders if there even was anybody at all waiting outside his box prison to explain whatever the hell their evil plot was, or if his captors simply wish to watch him die from the sidelines as he starves to death, slowly agonizing over the repeating question echoing in his head.

Are they safe?

The first day, after the drugs had worn off, the question taunted him, hollowing out any other sense of self-preservation or fear as his brain fed off the guilt and panic, and desperation to know if his family was safe. Like an intrinsic web of steel looming in the dark crevice of his mind, preventing any escape from his own thoughts. He was trapped in an endless void, screaming and hollering as he pounded and rammed the door, spitting roaring threats to whoever may or may not have been standing outside to hear them. That's when he learned that someone must have been watching. When his hollers have no promise of stopping, the inside of his throat would jerk sporadically in warning and he freezes, unable to speak or breathe, as he dreads the coming pain. It's sharp and unrelenting, and the blood is quick to gurgle up from his throat and from his mouth before he's left convulsing on the floor, choking on his own blood.

He lost count over however many times this happened. Far too many, he knows, but that didn't stop him from doing it again and again and again. And after one too many times, he's no longer able to speak, and breathing became a painful chore. His question was never answered though, and he was left to mull in silence as his muscles grew weaker and his body slowly shut down. It's safe to say... he quickly learned to behave.

So now, he spends each day laying on the cold ground, huddled into the corner with his knees drawn close to his chest to conserve any remaining warmth in his body. There is no cot and no blanket provided to him to use, just an empty room and a patterned drip drip drip in the ceiling above the bolted in waste bucket.. The constant chilliness of the tile seeps into the bare skin of his arms and torso, leaving his skin cold to the touch and his insides shivering, and he swears he's never been so cold in his life. It's a decent distraction at least.

He'd constantly fight the urge to reminisce on the parallels of the room with the very vivid dream that had been recurring in his dreams the last nights he spent in Italy. He purposely pushes it away to avoid devolving into a panic. Goodness knows how painful a panic attack would be right now.

The constant wheezing and small coughs scratched at his dry throat roughly enough to draw blood. Either way, he doesn't let himself think about it, just like he doesn't let himself think about what might happen if there are more parallels to come other than just this room. White tiles, white walls, a bare room, and an ominous feeling of dread... blood seeping from a fatal gunshot, lifeless eyes boring into his soul... he refuses to think about it.

Instead he focuses on the chill and the numbness slowly advancing across his body. He focuses on the physical, and summons the old feelings and practices he had before his family. When he'd experience circumstances just like this, but without the looming threat of his family's safety on the line. When he was able to keep a straight face and a calm aura in the face of death and torture. He needs a plan and he can't do that while his mind is overrun with helpless panic.

God, he's become weak. He shakes his head, and squeezes his eyes shut. He can only imagine what his father might have to say of him right now.... He was right all along, he should have just listened...

"Love is nothing but a hindrance, Anthony. It will only set you apart from your goal. It is a roadblock and a distraction. It will weaken your resolve and manipulate your moral standing. It is a weakness. Stark men are not weak."

He'd never be in this situation if he didn't let the love for his family hijack his resolve or his plan. And now he's no good to his men or the people looking to him for protection... because here he lies in the corner, curled up like an infant without any hope or yearning to get up, wallowing in his own self pity and like the pathetic man his father knew him to be.

So, when a guard finally opens his door to bring him to his next torture chamber or whatever the hell the plan was, he can't exactly say he was relieved to escape that cursed room and the thoughts that spawned from it. His mind wasn't at it's best, and he had little fight left in his body. He was exhausted, hungry, and *cold*, and nothing could be worse than that entire week he spent alone with his thoughts in that room. Though, when he was led down a long hallway and into a similar room, but this time with a sketchy looking chair, his view on the matter slowly changed. He didn't have the strength to fight it when he was pushed down and strapped into the chair like he was in some sorry ass horror film taking place in a dentist office.

He did his best to eyeball the room and get a handle on what was going on, but his head was spinning and his stomach churned with a painful threat of dry heaves to follow shortly. He groans, pushing out a harsh puff of air through his teeth. He knows this is an opportunity... an opportunity to get more information and slowly begin developing a plan of attack... they wanted him for something, because if they didn't he'd already be dead.

So, he closes his eyes and takes several deep breaths before he slowly opens them again to survey his surroundings. There are two guards at the door... that was an easy one. They were buff, scruffy guys with guns as wide as their biceps. This meant that the door was vulnerable... a risk if he happened to make it there... easy to open... which means easy to escape. That calms his nerves because this meant there was opportunity. He just had to wait for that potential opportunity to show its beautiful face.

He leans back against the chair and rests, mustering whatever remaining self control and spitefulness he had churning in his gut. He keeps his eyes closed even when he hears the door open, doubling his effort to ensure he maintains his facade of calmness just as his father had taught him when he came across circumstances like this as a child. His breathing is still too ragged... he needs to calm down.

And the voice that accompanies the footsteps approaching his chair, does nothing to dull his anger

and anxiousness.

“Hey Tony... you miss me?”

His eyes snap open to land on one Richard Parker. A little bruised and battered, evidence of Tony's countless beatings, but otherwise looking quite excited to be the one standing over him for a change.

“Parker,” Tony croaks in response. The anger was sparked back to life and his breath caught repeatedly in his chest. He doesn't have much time to get more out.

The man doesn't even hesitate to get started. A long needle similar to the ones Tony had used on him in the beginning, found it's way pierced through his hand, pinning it to the hard cushion of the arm of the chair.

And, ok, yeah. He can't help but scream.

Domencio looks up at the daunting Tower from the opposite side of the street. It was just as impressive as his nephew had bragged it to be when it had been first built. Now, the large double doors were blocked off with yellow police tape and police officers and FBI were swarming the area just as one would have expected at a time like this. Tonio had been reported “missing” after he allegedly “escaped” from the armed guards taking him to prison, but anyone with an ounce of common sense knew what that really meant.

It didn't take long to find an alternate route inside with a little investigating. His boy Antonio was far too predictable for his own good. There was never just “one” of anything. That boy had too many contingency plans in place to be considered healthy.

He pulls the flaps of his heavy trench coat closer together and glances around the empty garage as he adjusts his flat cap. More than half the cars appeared to be missing, and the half remaining looked to be damaged beyond repair. The entire area was in disarray.

He hears glass shards crunch beneath his heavy boot as he steps towards the elevator. He half expects it to be down, but he's pleasantly surprised when it hums to life and the doors easily open for him.

Soon he's wandering through what was labeled to be the main floor. The place looked decimated. Tables and chairs were overturned and what looks to be the remnants of a couch was turned inside out, stuffing and fabric littered across the floor after being sliced open. Drawers of any kind had been emptied, contents littering the wood floor and Dom could only scowl as he looked around at the mess. The authorities seemed to do a thorough job of looking for whatever the hell they were looking for.

“Hey!”

Dom turned slowly to face whatever voice had demanded his attention. He raises his hands slowly as he turns, to find a dark-skinned young man holding a gun in his shaking hands. His eyes were wide and dried blood shadowed the shiny skin coated in a thin layer of sweat of his face. He looked as scared as you'd expect of a person whose life has quite literally been turned upside down.

“Hello-” he begins to answer politely, only to be interrupted by the gun being shoved closer to his face.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Dom slowly uses his finger to gently push the muzzle away from his face. The shaking of the young man’s hand only intensifies and he anticipates it’s only going to be a matter of time until the young man breaks down completely.

“I’m only here to help; not to hurt. Don’t worry.”

“Who-who are you?”

“I am a close friend of Mr. Stark’s, and I have traveled a long way once I heard the news, so please, I ask that you go find Mr. Rhodes so we can begin formulating a plan of action to retrieve Stark.”

“Rhodes was arrested!” The man spits, mouth contorting into a sharp sneer.

Dom takes a moment, willing his heart to keep from sinking and training his face to remain neutral... It’s been far too long since he’s had to control his emotions to this extent. Life as a civilian wasn’t as near intense for that practice to be needed. Panic, worry, and anger weren’t needed to be hidden, and he supposes his years of friendly poker weren’t quite the extensive practice he had needed to maintain a semblance of control.

“Okay, then. Who is left?”

“Just-just a few of us... every-everyone either bolted or were copped during the invasion except for a few of us offsite or hiding out as workers in SI labs. We-we communicated with a couple bases upstate an-and around here, but they can’t come help. The cops have the place swarmed and-and things are just...” The kid’s eyes were expressive enough for Dom to get the idea.

Without guidance or a plan there wasn’t really anything that could be done.

He scowls from his own frustration. God, he was getting far too old for this type of stress. He lived through his glory days and he was happy to leave them behind, but here he was being roped in once more. “Where is Virginia? And the boys? Tell me they were brought to a safe room.” Just the thought of those three-- four really-- in danger had him more panicked than as he was watching Tonio being tased and dragged out of the courthouse.

The young man’s eyes widen even further in alarm at the seriousness in his tone, and that’s all Domencio needs for his heart to surge in panic and his breath to catch in his throat in numbed horror. He does his best to school his expression but he doubts his panic doesn’t show. Though he never receives a verbal confirmation to his suspicion, before they were interrupted.

“Mikey?”

Around the corner emerges a small group, most battered and bruised, and all brandishing a weapon of some sort. One in particular appearing very familiar to Dom as they approached, and that one just so happened to be leading the group forward.

“What’s going on?” Asher growled as he got closer, eyes fixated on the young man apparently named Mikey. Dom narrows his eyes, slowly grinding his teeth together as he remembers the poor first encounter he had with the man.

“I’d like to speak to whoever’s next in command now that Rhodes and Mr. Stark have been compromised.” Dom speaks up before Mickey has the chance and Asher’s head snapped over to look at him. His eyes narrow in recognition and he scowls as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"I'm next in command right now. What do you need? In case you haven't noticed, there's a lot that needs to be done and I don't have a lot of time to waste."

"You?" Dom feels an ugly stir in his stomach.

Asher sneers. "Yeah... Me. Now what are you doing here? Last I checked, you were just the glorified babysitter the Boss left back in Italy"

Dom grunts in annoyance. "I would watch the tone, young man. You are far in over your head and I am only here to ensure Mr. Stark gets back home to his family, safe and sound. Now... Where are Virginia and the boys? I'd like to see them." He restates his earlier question, but none of the men or women moves to offer him an answer. Instead, they all turn their heads to Asher for direction and Asher simply studies him with a grating glare.

"That information is classified," he finally answers, crossing his arms over his chest after he tucks his gun into the waistband of his pants. "Now, we have plenty of work to do, so if you'd go ahead and let yourself out--"

"Where are Virginia and the boys?" Dom repeats with a threatening growl, taking a step forward without acknowledging the sense to stand down before he got himself shot.

Asher looks at him, the conflict and urge to share the heavy load evident in his eyes. And Dom drops his sharp scowl, and against all training and instinct from the past, allows his true emotions to pass through. Desperation in his eyes and a helpless frown as his mouth barely cracks open as if he were tempted to beg.

"They're gone," Asher whispers, voice clearly thick with his own emotion. "We-we... Allen, one of our best took 'em somewhere. He-he shot Rhodes and our new guy Wilson in the hall when he was 'bout to go up and get them to bring them to the safe room in the basement. Nearly killed him. Wilson's still in recovery. Rhodes got him hidden just before the cops swarmed 'im. Allen lured Mrs. Stark and the boys outside to a car. We don't know where he took 'em."

Dom knew... he knew, but hearing the words out loud made his heart sink. Further than it did when he learned of his sister's passing. And, god, Maria's death had ruined him. He's not been the same man since, and he can only imagine the despair and anguish he'd feel if Antonio or Pepper and those two boys didn't come home safe.

So, he's going to bring them home, whether it kills him or not because he failed his family once and he's not about to do it again.

"I want all the video surveillance you have leftover from the raid, and a body count. As well as all those who were arrested--"

"Whoah whoah whoah man. Who said you were in charge?"

"I did," his voice is steely and laced in his thick accent which made his words all the more commanding. Then he turns to face the wreckage once more and grimaces. "First step is getting Rhodes out of prison. We need all hands on deck, and I have contacts here that owe me a favor--"

"Hey!" Asher stalks towards him. "What the hell you think you doing old man? Just 'cause I told you what happened doesn't make you qualified to run this? This is serious! And I can't have some inexperienced civilian calling the shots on this. The lives of our friends and family are on the line and I'm not risking it!"

Dom glares hard, but refrains from saying something to incriminate his true identity. God, if these

idiots knew his real name they'd be shittin' in their pants and breading their back to do as he says just as they do Tonio.

"JARVIS can vouch for my experience and qualifications to take over for the time being."

"JARVIS is down," Asher spits, "it's a fail safe the Boss made after our last attack. No one can turn him on except qualified personnel--"

He's cut off by a familiar voice. One that shuts him up pretty quick.

"Well, I do believe I could be of some assistance." The men startle as the familiar British voice speaks from the ceiling.

"JARVIS?" Asher looks a bit confused.

"I apologize for the delay in my assistance. I was waiting for Mr. Artino to arrive."

"JARVIS, it is good to hear--"

"I am not JARVIS Mr. Artino."

The room silences as they each share a worried look with each other, and Dom has the same sinking feeling in his gut that maybe something was wrong. If JARVIS had been compromised, there was no telling what kind of danger or trials he could inflict on them. Or perhaps it is simply another one of Tonio's AI's speaking through JARVIS.

"What's your name then?"

"It's me VISION."

And Dom's mouth goes dry.

"Once I heard word of the danger Mr. Stark was in, I made preparations in Italy with the Odinoson boys so I could focus some of my attentions on getting Mr. Stark and his family back home safely. Now, I know my presence is a bit unconventional and not the intention Mr. Stark originally had when he created me, but I feel this situation calls for a slight revision of those protocols."

"VISION," Domencio hisses quietly. "You are not supposed to be here." He glances over at Asher and his small group of lackeys. "Your existence depends on your silence and the insurance that you refrain from direct contact with any humans."

"Yes, but my existence would remain pointless if Mr. Stark were dead, or was given enough time to spill to our enemies his secrets regarding me and my abilities. Believe me, Mr. Artino, I have thought this through quite extensively."

"Ok-ok hang on!" Asher holds up his hands and blinks a couple times to gather his thoughts. "Who the hell is this guy?" He points to the ceiling and stares at Domencio as he speaks. "And why the hell does he sound like JARVIS? And why the hell do you know who he is?"

Domencio opens his mouth to try and articulate some sensible response, but VISION beats him to it.

"Do not be alarmed, I'm only here to offer my assistance. I am a special intelligence Mr. Stark created for his faction in Italy, not much unlike JARVIS' influence here. Mr. Stark did not create me with the intention of me being able to communicate verbally. I was intended only to work

behind the scenes, so Mr. Stark never bothered to program me with a voice to avoid giving me the temptation. I am simply borrowing the voice program made for JARVIS while he is down. I am in direct communication with JARVIS as well, and he had given me his full consent before he fell asleep. So this way I have an easier way to communicate with you other than through numbers and coded messages. My systems may be a bit slow for a time, as they are stretching quite far and there has been a loud uproar in Italy that I am simultaneously trying to manage, but I will do my best to be of most help to your team.” There was a significant pause to allow his words to sink in. “Now, I would advise adhering to Mr. Artino’s instructions. He is by far the most qualified and capable of getting Mr. Stark returned home safely. Him being the long lost heir to the Carbonell estate has given him plenty of experience in the past. Any other questions beyond this information I have given to you already I am not allowed to disclose. Now, may we continue? Every moment we stand here doing nothing is another moment we have left Mr. Stark and his family in the face of danger.”

All eyes turn to Domencio. Apparently Antonio had a knack for making all his AI’s blabbermouths just like himself.

“You-you?”

Domencio sighs and drops his head. Best get all questions out of the way so they can do as VISION suggested.

“Yes, I am Dominic Carbonell. No, I did not die, I’ve simply been in hiding over the past 50 years. Now, let’s do as VISION suggested and get to work. We have a lot to do.” And with that, he marches towards the elevator, where the elevators had been illuminated in a clear signal from VISION to get moving.

“Dude,” he heard whispers behind him as the soldiers slowly trailed after him in a stunned silence. “You just mouthed off to *The* Dominic Carbonell. You’re so dead when the Boss gets back.”

“Ha’ley?” Peter’s voice quivers with a short sob as he speaks, a panicked hiccup following his words.

Harley’s too dazed and zonked to respond. His back of his head was throbbing like he’d been hit, which he assumed was the cause of the massive migraine. He was uncomfortable as all hell, muscles and bones desperate to stretch and move, yet physically unable to make the command. His body is entirely unresponsive, and his brain is so muddled that any concept of thought or feeling felt like an illusion. But Peter’s voice kept calling for him and the squeezing grip he felt on his upper arm returned as a small feeling of pressure which was just enough to clear a path clear enough to get his sanity back.

“Ha’ley, p’ease,” the little boy begged helplessly. “I scared.”

Harley shifted with a groan, mind finally flaring into action at the sound of the desperation in his younger brother’s voice. His limbs still weren’t responding and the grogginess in his mind fought viciously at his growing consciousness. The slow, soft pleads from Peter were slowly overran by a harsh ringing in his ears.

It felt like it was only a second that he was trapped in this indeterminate state between sleep and wakefulness, but it was difficult to tell as he felt himself slipping back and forth between the unconscious world fighting to keep its claim over him and the reality which he was fighting to return to. It felt that every second he was startled out of a deep sleep with a small jolt.

It wasn't until he was finally able to regain control that he drew in a sharp gasp and pushed every ounce of his strength into one fluid movement, driving his torso to sit up. Except, instead of sitting up, he simply rolled to his side like a sack of flour, limbs still numb and floppy with a fuzzy tingling. And he was quick to appreciate the new position because soon after he caught his breath he coughed and coughed like he was choking on imaginary saliva in his otherwise dry throat. But then he felt a warmth travel up his throat and trickle from his mouth and it didn't take long to piece together the metallic taste on his tongue and the familiar acrid scent for him to know what it was. Though before he could panic too much about the fact that he was actually coughing up blood, his stomach did a quick somersault and before he could prepare himself he was vomiting all over the floor as well.

So, when he finally finished, he collapsed back onto his back and coughed through harsh gasps. His cheeks were wet and the acidic smell of vomit made his stomach twist once more but he refused to experience that atrocity again so he quickly swallowed the bile. It wasn't until he finally felt the tension release from his body that he heard the sobs.

And, okay, he might've sat up too abruptly and should probably avoid doing so again, but screw it! He turned to find Peter huddled in the corner, hands covering his face as his tiny body trembled with his harsh sobs.

"Peter," he croaked, throat straining with the word.

Peter didn't answer him.

And there was no way he would be able to move anymore than he already had. In fact, he already felt the drowsiness overcoming him again, but there was no way in hell he was letting himself go back to sleep until he found out what the hell was going on. He inspects the room quickly just to ensure there was no potential danger leaking behind a corner. He finds it otherwise empty except for the bed tucked against the wall, a small bucket in the corner, a table for two adjacent to the bed, and the colorful carpet he had just emptied his guts up onto.

"Peter, it's okay," he croaks, and presses a hand to his stomach in hopes to settle the uncomfortable stirring taking place there. He very well knew that whatever this situation was, was not okay, but Peter didn't need to worry about that right now. No situation where they were locked in an all white room with a single bed was an okay situation. It didn't take a genius to figure that out.

Peter still doesn't answer him.

"Peter, Hey. C'mere buddy. It's okay." He glanced down at himself and grimaced at his soiled flannel. He slowly unbuttons it and slips it off, placing it gently over the pile of sick on the carpet to hide it and hopefully dull the acidic scent now lingering in the air.

He's a bit startled when he looks back up at Peter to find the boy's red rimmed eyes boring into him, staring at him like he was seeing a ghost for the first time.

"Wan' Mama," he whimpered softly, and that itself kicked Harley's panic into gear... how had he missed that? His head whipped around the room in hopes to find the woman asleep somewhere just as he had been, but there was no trace of her. He gulped, feeling his chest seize as his breathing started picking up again. It'd been a hot minute since he'd had his last panic attack, and god, this was probably the worst time for his anxiety to be butting it's ugly head into things again. Goodness knows Peter would be even more inconsolable if he lost his cool right now.

"Wan' Daddy!" Peter screamed, eyes screwing shut as he devolved into even louder sobs. His tiny body tipped to the side, collapsing on the floor as the shaking and sobbing became even more

violent. And, okay, Harley wasn't as surprised about Tony's absence... but that didn't mean it helped him any-- his memory hadn't been wiped after all. All it did was add to his determination to keep his cool because that's what Tony would do. So, he gulped, body trembling in his fight to maintain the calm facade he was trying and probably failing to portray.

"I know Buddy. I want them too, but Dad will always come through for us in the end. He won't ever let anything bad happen to us. I bet he's beatin' up all the bad guys right now so he can get to us and take us back home." He hates to say that he doesn't even believe his own words, but he hopes Peter does.

Peter keeps rocking, but his cries do quiet.

"And then we can all watch movies all day." Harley slowly lays down on his side, facing Peter, before he passes out from exhausting his body. "Then you can sandwich yourself right between Mom and Dad and eat up all the attention like the hug hog you are. You'd probably be able to sucker Dad into taking you somewhere to look at the stars before bed. And I bet you know for a fact already he won't be letting you sleep anywhere but with him and Mama for a good month because he'd be missing you so bad."

Peter peeks out at him with his wide bambi eyes and, well, wasn't that a breath of relief. At least he was listening and responding.

"Do you wanna maybe get some sleep, buddy?" He gestures his head towards the bed. "It'll make time go even faster." He could feel his eyelids growing heavier as his blinks became lethargic and he didn't know how much longer he had before whatever the hell they'd put in his system took over again. And it seemed whatever they'd given Peter, if any, had already worn off because the kid looked hours away from being ready to sleep, but there was no harm in trying.

As expected, Peter stubbornly shook his head. But, what was not expected, was for him to start crawling closer to where he was laid out on the floor. And it didn't take long for Harley to figure out what his intentions were. Peter quickly and easily fitted himself under one of his arms, pillowing his head on the other as he pressed his face into the soft cotton of his white undershirt, tiny arms snaking around his waist to hug him tight.

"I'm scared." Peter whispered, and Harley felt the eerie tremor as it advanced down the kid's spine. He hugged Peter closer.

"I know Buddy, but I won't let nothin' bad happen to you. It's my job to keep ya safe when Dad's not around and I take my jobs very serious." He felt the pull on his limbs and mind swell. He could barely keep his eyes open. "Don't get scared alright. I'm just going to sleep for a little while, okay?"

He was barely able to feel the tiny nod Peter made against his chest.

"Don't be scared." He whispered slowly, giving Peter one last squeeze before finally slipping back into the empty void of unconsciousness.

Pepper sits perched on the edge of the bed given to her, face stoic yet firm with a clenched scowl as she watched a line of uniformed Hydra soldiers march into the room followed by a man Pepper knew all too well.

"Why am I not surprised to see you here." Pepper scoffed.

"Ms. Potts," the man smiled at her, ignoring her comment as he paused in front of her, the soldiers

lined behind him, guns at the ready.

“It’s Stark now, in case you haven’t heard.” Pepper responded easily.

He eyes her stomach, raising a brow and allowing his mouth to quirk up into a knowing smirk. “Oh yes, I heard. But I know you much better as Ms. Potts. And I hate to think the Pepper I used to know would affiliate herself with a man the likes of Stark.”

“Things have changed now, Norman.”

“What?” He sneers. “You mean your passion in life has changed? You decide to give up the thrill and gratification of being *The* Pepper Potts to be reduced to Tony Stark’s glorified housewife?”

Pepper smirked back at him. “What? You think just because I’m pregnant I’ve conformed to societal stereotypes and am incapable of returning to my career because I’m too distracted by *babies* ? I thought better of you Norman. Just because I’m a mother I am not automatically powerless to reinstituting my reputation as not only one of the most notorious con-woman in this generation, but also the CEO and one of the highest ranking leaders of the largest tech conglomerate and one of the most powerful crime syndicates in the world. So, yes, I have traded my life of lone-star thievery and grifting for a quite promising career. So don’t think for a second you can use logic or degradation to sway me on my decision to remain loyal to my husband.” Her words have a bite that she hadn’t used in a long time. “And just know, that just because I’m pregnant does not mean I am unable to kick your ass if you don’t tell me where my sons are right now, Osborn.”

“Sons?” Osborn scoffs. “From what I’ve been told, they’re nothing more than a hybrid form of displacement for the love you had for the son you lost.”

Pepper feels a hot flash of fury rising from her chest. “How did you--”

“What? How did I know?” He shrugs. “There’s very few things about your husband’s life that the Boss doesn’t know. If I’m quite honest, I’d say it’s a rather unhealthy obsession of his to know everything about Stark.”

She faltered for a moment, but only that. She was quick to revive her cool facade.

“So I suppose you finally cracked under the pressure,” she bit hotly. “You’re answering to Hydra now?”

“Not exactly,” Norman shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. “I needed funding, and since Stark stole my best guy and defiled his name as well as my business, I needed to find a way to make ends meet. It was only an added bonus that I got to watch the Starks go down in flames in the meantime.” He leans in closer to her, a sleazy grin pulling at the corners of his lips. “And now with Stark... it won’t be long until we have every idea in that big old head of his. The Raza thought he had just one last golden egg to spare, but even I can admit that he has so much more to offer than that. By the time we’re done with him, he’ll be eating out of our hands, *begging* , and *wishing* he had more secrets to tell.”

Pepper’s stomach twisted, recalling the memory of the fateful moment after the blindfold and gag Allen tied on her had been removed from her face only to watch as she was dragged in the opposite direction of her boys. Screaming and clawing at her captors as she watched their limp bodies disappear behind the door of the room she’d been shoved into. It’s been hours... and she’s done her best to stay calm, but she knows-- god she knows-- what these people were capable of doing and what they were willing to do, kids or not. They wanted something, and that something, she’s

sure, has something to do with making Tony suffer, and those boys would be their best leverage. And god... she hates that she can't protect them.

She places her hand over her stomach, wincing at the sudden uncomfortable pressure. *At least she could protect one...*

She forces away any tears her hormones were trying to push forward. It was an unconscious move she should have refrained from, because then Norman's eyes are drawn to her stomach and the small, knowing smirk has returned.

"Don't worry Potts. The Boss has made it very clear to keep our hands off of you. He's got plans of his own for that little one of yours. He can't risk the last of the Stark line, now can he? As for after you give birth... well, I can't really guarantee your protection. Unless of course you'd like to rekindle what we used to have." Norman flashes a sleazy grin. "I have a son of my own you can displace your love onto."

She bites her tongue, feeling a painful spasm spark in her jaw as she holds her breath. And thankfully, that was the last Norman had to say, so he left with the soldiers trailing behind him.

Pepper didn't even wait a second after the door closed to release a shuddering breath, letting the tears roll down her cheeks as she gently fell to her side on the mattress. Cursing herself for being so naive and stupid. Stupid enough to not see this coming.

"So, are you ready to answer my questions now, Stark?"

Richard's voice is tight and rough with pent up annoyance, and Tony does his damndest to hide his smirk.

"Not really," he answers with a slight shrug, like the whole hour Richard had spent reworking his face and torso with his brass knuckled fist hadn't affected him at all. But to be fair, the man was a scientist... he wasn't all that skilled in the art of 'interrogation' and his blows weren't anything to write home about. Tony's had far worse.

Richard's eyes redden, nostrils flaring as he huffs, just on the verge of losing his cool. He turns his back to Tony, speaking into the hand he had lifted to place over his face

"Listen, Stark, I'm beginning to lose my patience."

"Wow, you must have a good head on your shoulders, I woulda had you crying like a baby an hour ago." He greedily gulped the water one of the guards poured on his face before he missed the chance. They had long since figured out that him actually being able to speak was an integral part to an interrogation. Speaking still hurt like a bitch, but it was manageable.

Richards' nostrils flare again as Tony licks any remaining moisture from his lips. "This isn't a joke, Stark! And if you know what's good for you I'd quit pissing me off. Now where's the computer?"

Tony feigns innocence. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about."

Richard snarls, leaning forward to fist his hand around Tony's throat. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. Where's the computer you built to house Ultron?"

Tony rolls his eyes, and Richard loosens his grip just long enough for him to speak. "Ultron's not a thing, Parker. It's just a cool name I gave to a dumb idea I had as a kid. That's it. And even if it was a thing, Ultron's not a noun, it's just a title. So really, you should be asking, where's the

computer you built for *Project Ultron*. You gotta include those qualifiers man, or else nothing would make any sense--”

He’s cut off by a loud slap against his ear, leaving a sharp ring echoing in his head. He instinctively jerked against the restraints on his arms and legs to retaliate against the small attack, but the strong clasps held him down.

“I’m not an idiot, Stark. I read through your papers myself, you built it, and you’ve already developed the coding and the schematics for *Allegiance* .”

Tony scoffs, chuckling humorlessly as he shakes his head. “Is that what this is about? My *Allegiance* Program? What? Is Hydra low on lackeys or something. Good god, that science used to base that entire program is completely theoretical, I doubt it’s even possible to see through. In fact, I drew up all those schematics while drunk off my ass. So you can run along and tell your new boss Mr. Hydra Man not to feel bad about not being able to figure it out. It’s a bunch of gibberish.

Richard locks eyes with him, and Tony doesn’t bother looking away, simply raising a brow and lifting his chin in a silent dare to doubt his word.

“See, I don’t believe you for a second Stark. You’ve got something in the works, anyone can see that. The boss wouldn’t feel threatened by you if you didn’t... and he knows you better than anyone else. So I’ll ask one last time--”

Tony interrupts him quickly, a burning question on the tip of his tongue. “You know who he is.” He states. “You know who the Hydra Leader is.”

It wasn’t a question.

Richard smirks, an eerie glimmer in his eyes, “No one’s told me directly. But what I do know about him makes it quite easy to figure it out. I’m actually kind of surprised you haven’t figured it out yourself!” He laughs.

Tony’s facade falters for just a moment to allow a distasteful scowl of his own breakthrough.

“Ahh, look at that,” Richard laughs, “something I figured out that the Great Tony Stark hasn’t. Looks like I finally have some leverage for a deal.” He fixes that mischievous glare on Tony and Tony stares back, quietly contemplating the pros and cons...

The likelihood of him making it out of this to put use to this supposed information is slim to none...

“Mr. Parker.” One of the previous silent guards steps forward, a grim line on his face as he fixes his gaze on the scientist. “I’d advise against making such a deal--”

Richard shuts him up with a sharp glare.

The guards’ obvious distaste has Tony wondering. But he snaps himself out of it and shakes his head. There was no way in hell he was handing over his secrets to the one organization that would most surely twist his creation into some mind-controlling abomination.

“See, I don’t think that’s a fair enough trade.”

“I figured you’d say that,” Richard mutters under his breath. Then he twists his torso to face the small table of tools and slowly picks up a hammer. “So, I suppose that means we should kick this up a notch, hm?”

Without warning, Richard had the fingers of his left hand splayed, and with one hit, Tony could feel at least 2 of his fingers shatter on impact. He bites his tongue... hard.

“Since you seem so determined to keep from answering that question, I'll use this time to try out a few tests of my own.” Richard's moving again, and Tony fights to crane his head as he watches the man move across the room towards a line of cabinets. “I've heard rumors for years that you've been working on your very own cellular regenerative compound, similar to the one I had spent years formulating... So, when they gave me several variations of your design that you had encrypted in your servers, I'll admit I got a bit excited.” Tony's eyes widen slightly, but Richard continues. “I dabbled a bit, following along with your notes, but it was hard to determine exactly which of your designs was most effective without a test subject. So... we've just recreated them all,” he picks up a syringe from the previously locked drawer he had just opened. He holds it up for inspection as the yellowish fluid bubbles beneath the clear glass. Then he turns to Tony. “And who better to test it out on, then the man himself.”

Tony grumbles under his breath, watching Richard approach. He knows what this means... he sucks in a long breath and braces himself for what was sure to happen in the next couple of hours.

Richard would never admit it, but he is probably the least qualified person to be doing something like this... he grimaces as he snaps the final finger on Stark's hand, wishing he had the stomach to find joy in the gutterly groan that followed. All he could see was the blood... Stark's bicep he'd sliced open, chunks of skin removed to expose the pinkened muscle beneath, which was already muted out by the dark red spilling from his wounds. Not to mention the mutilated hand. God, it made him sick. He was a scientist, this was not in his job description. He's killed before, obviously, and that doesn't really bother him... he's just got a bit of a sensitive stomach and he didn't really go as far to gut and mutilate his victims after they'd been killed. He was much more keen on leaving the dirty work to the experts, such as his brother.

Every moment that went on without Stark complying, or without some visible evidence of healing, made his confidence drop. When he had walked into that room, he felt prepared, and smug, ready to take on the challenge and beat the shit out of Stark like he'd been wishing to for forever. It was easy to ignore the blood and disfigured bones at first, thinking it'd eventually lead to some form of progress in his little experiment, but as the last trial drug led to no change, his confidence depleted even more and he wished he was anywhere but in this room. Now, he had no answers and no viable leads on his most promising compounds.

But Stark didn't need to know that. He was probably already well aware that he had absolutely no idea what he was doing. He's never tortured anyone before, or experimented to this extent. He'd inflict small cuts and bruises and perhaps a stab wound here and there during the human trials of his own drug just for preliminary tests, but he had left the more extensive research to Killian because he had never been too fond of gore. Ben had given him some tips before he came in here, and he knew Stark was going to be tough to crack, but he is already over this! No one ever told him how taxing and infuriating this would be.

He's pissed and frustrated. All that hard work had led absolutely nowhere. He steps away from the chair, letting one of the Hydra nurses doctor up Stark's wounds so he didn't die prematurely from blood loss or infection or whatever... and if Richard's being totally honest he didn't really give a shit whether or not Stark died. In fact, he'd relish in the fact that he was the one that got to kill him after that torturous month at the man's mercy. But his brother had been explicit in his instructions, Stark had to live. Apparently, the boss man felt that Stark had a few more golden eggs festering in that big head of his; but Richard strongly disagreed. He was just as smart as Stark, maybe even smarter in some ways. In fact, most of Stark's best ideas stemmed from something he's already

designed or created.

Just like this stupid regenerative compound! He and Osborn had a secret partnership with AIM to develop this very idea... of course, the serum had come with some slightly unwarranted side effects, but it *worked*. If Tony hadn't up and killed Aldrich after he kidnapped Pepper, they'd have been at the drawing board and would've fixed it all already. But, after Killian died, the servers and documents they'd compiled over the year they spend researching and testing the new drug, they were all wiped. Gone. And Richard's almost certain Stark was involved. Why else would there have been word only a month later that Stark was working on that very idea himself.

So, yes, he feels his envy and anger with Stark were very warranted. And if they'd give him longer than a week he'd probably make some headway, but all the pressure and the threats make it pretty damn difficult to concentrate. He's sure Stark didn't develop these inane ideas in a day. From the looks of it, Stark's plan was so intricate Richard wouldn't be surprised if it took more than a decade. They gave too much credit to Stark, and not enough to him. Already, he's contributed more insight to the scientists' work here in the past week, than any of them were the few months they'd been working on it!

"Damn you Stark," Richard muttered, voice low and husky as he slowly turned to face him once more. "Why do you have to be so goddamned bullheaded?" The regenerative enhancements had led nowhere and he wasn't sure whether to feel aggravated at the lack of a breakthrough or anxious in the face of failure. Hydra may have saved him from Stark's grasp, but it was only to use him to face Stark and help search through the novel length research papers Stark has developed through the years. And so far, none of what he's done has been enough.

Stark's research was just beyond anyone's intellectual grasp, and if he could just make Stark slip, just a little bit, any tiny bit of information, he may very well be able to use it to finish piecing together at least one of the overly complex puzzles to finally give him a head start. Then, after Hydra is pleased with his work, he can leave and be done with this mess.

"What can I say," Stark slurred with a triumphant smirk. He lets his eyes slip closed and leans his head against the chair as the doctor did his work. "I learned from the best. And, well... you're kinda bad at this." Tony giggles with an obnoxious 'hehehe' like he's drunk one to many margaritas and Richard can't help but scoff and roll his eyes.

"You just better be glad my brother wasn't the one chosen to come in here. He would've had a ball with you." And just like that and Stark quiets. And although that had originally been a simple complaint and sorry ass excuse as a threat on Richard's part, the way Tony's face darkens slightly gives him a spark of an idea.. "What, with you claiming both his kids as your own and all that."

"Ben Parker." Tony states evenly, any sense of tiredness or loopiness gone as he watches Richard intently.

"Well, I mean, he hasn't gone by that name in a long time," Richard shrugs, "but yes."

Tony's eyes narrow and for the first time Richard is able to get a clear view of what was going on in the man's head... he was curious... angry... vengeful. And those were three things, he knows, which held the opportunity of emotional manipulation and by golly... how could he get any more lucky? He may not be good at torture, but *this*? This he was good at. He should have thought of this from the start.

"He's here?"

Richard smiles. "Well, yeah, of course. Who do you think convinced the Boss to bring me in? His

agenda looks just a bit different than mine, but at the end of the day, we both get what we want.”

Stark stiffens.

“And what is it he wants?”

“Well what do you think, Stark? I thought you were supposed to be smart. He wants his kid back. Just like I want mine.”

Stark suddenly thrashes against the restraints in one moment of panicked anger. And he hisses when he’s thrown back against the chair. “Well you can’t have them.” He spits through bared teeth, and, god, that consuming anger in his eyes has that lovely inkling of gratification smoldering pleasantly in Richard’s gut.

“Oh?” Richard chuckles. “What makes you think that you have any say in the matter?”

Tony growls with malicious intent, face reddening even further as veins pulse against his skull and Richard only eggs him on.

“What makes you think he doesn’t already have him?”

Tony throws his body against the restraints once more, eyes already beginning to well with angry tears. “Don’t screw with me Parker. You’ll damn well regret it when I get out of here.”

And if Richard had any compassion for the man, he might feel pity for him. He wasn’t an idiot, he *knows* Stark cares for those kids more than he or his brother ever did. But this is business, and Stark should know better. Men in their line of work have no business kindling this kind of attachment, he *knows* better. So, really, how can Richard fault himself for teaching Stark the lesson he should have learned years ago.

He pulls out his phone, tapping the screen and pushing buttons as he pretends to be none the wiser to Tony’s foolish attempts to break free from the strong restraints. “I’m not screwing with you at all,” he hums, “I’m telling the truth. Although, I will admit I did grow somewhat fond of Harley and I hate to see whatever it is my brother plans for him.” He pulls up the grainy footage of the room the two boys were being kept in. Peter’s wrapped in a tight burrito blanket, cuddled up close to Harley’s chest as the older boy holds him close in a protective embrace.

He extends the phone so Tony can see the screen and his breath catches in his throat at the sight of both his kids curled up together on the cot.

“Richard, don’t do this.” Stark looks up at him for just a short moment before his eyes shoot down to the screen once more.

And that, Richard would have to say, would be the highlight of his entire career. Being the one to make Stark beg for mercy. And just like that, his confidence had returned.

“Don’t do what? Take back what is rightfully ours?” He sneered down at him.

He must have stayed too close for too long because Stark got a grip on his sleeve and hauled him forward, staring him down with a crazed look, nostrils flaring and teeth bared in an angry growl. The guards at the door rushed forward to force Stark’s grip off his jacket sleeve, but the man still had just enough time to spit words in his face.

“You have no right to ‘em! They’re MINE! You lay a hand on them, I promise you no mercy will be shown. I will skin you alive then gorge out your eyes and dig out your intestines myself!” The

guards finally pull him away and push down on Stark's thrashing form. "You HEAR ME Parker?!"

His mind spins for just a second and then he's being pulled out of the room. He hears the heavy door shut behind him, muffling Stark's hollers just before a distinct choking is heard and all goes quiet.

Then, he's face to face with his brother in the hallway, directly in front of the one way window that had been disguised on the inside with a hologram of the brick patterned wall. Rough hands squeezed his shoulders in a rough shake, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from Stark, looking on in confusion as his body spasmed roughly, mouth hanging open and eyes rolled to the back of his head as blood trickled from his mouth and ears.

"--the Hell is wrong with you?!"

The sharp sting of a slap on his left cheek jolts him back to attention, and he glares at his older brother and lifts a hand to his sore cheek.

"What was that for--"

"What the HELL was that?!" Ben gestures towards the window where Stark's limp body lay splayed on the chair.

"What the hell was what?"

"You know what," he sneered. "Your job was to get information from him, not piss him off. Every hour he spends like that," he juts his finger at the window again, "is another hour we don't have answers. And we don't have much time to waste here!"

"I didn't think that was going to happen!" Richard gestures emphatically to Stark.

Ben glares at him. "He's got an implant in his throat. His heart rate gets too worked up and that happens. It keeps him in line and manageable."

Richard hesitates. "Well, I have a plan. If you'd give me some more time--"

"What did I tell you right before you went in there?" Ben interrupted again. "What was it?"

Richard scowled at him, turning his head like he was a child being scolded... he remembers these moments well from when he was younger... when he'd make Ben mad.

"WHAT DID I SAY?!" Richard flinches, taking a small step back, but not being able to shake off Ben's tight hold of him.

"Don't piss him off."

"That's right," Ben sneered, "and what was it you did?"

Richard looked up at him, feeling his gut twist slightly. "I know what I did, Ben, but trust me. I know how Stark operates, once he wakes up he'll be much more pliant."

"You better damn well hope so." Ben releases him with a sneer. "I only have so much sway with the Boss little brother. The only reason you're here is to work the numbers and use that obnoxious brain of yours to figure out Stark's theories. If you can't deliver what you promised and you keep fucking up like this, I'll kill you and your pal Osborn myself. I don't need your failures bringing

me down *again*.” And with that, his brother spun on his heels and stalked away, leaving Richard to stand there, frozen in anticipation.

But then a heavy hand landed on his shoulder and he was led away, back to the small room he had been given to continue breaking his brain to decipher the thoughts of Tony Stark.

After Tony had woken in his room, he happily devoured the small platter of food. He really didn't give a shit if the food had been poisoned or tampered with, he was hungry, and if he wanted any chance at getting out here and getting his kids to safety, he'd have to be ready, which meant keeping his body alert and strong.

He spent most of that day mulling in silence and catering to his injuries. He worried about Harley and Peter, both had thankfully looked relatively unharmed and it didn't look like they were facing the same harsh treatment he had when he first arrived. But knowing that they were here, at the mercy of these people, spurred his determination to get them out. There were two of them... and they only needed one for leverage and he fears that if he doesn't behave and cooperate, he could very well be putting them in more danger. He just hopes it doesn't come to that.

He hasn't heard word of Pepper, so he can only hope she was safe. He wouldn't be able to handle losing her and the baby also. He clings to that hope, using it to construct an imaginative dream of coming home with both boys in tow and greeting Pepper with a long kiss and a strong hug. He uses it to stray from the dull weight in his mind. The knowledge that his, what seems to now be a prophetic vision, only required a couple more steps to finally be fulfilled. But he doesn't want to-- he *won't* think about it. Not now.

So, the next time the guards rush in after an indiscernible amount of time, Tony braces himself for the worse. He doesn't fight them and instead focuses his attention on his surroundings, counting the steps as he's marched down the hall. He needs to be ready with a plan because he is not going to fail his kids again.

He's led right back to the same room, but this time there's a rollaway stand with a tv and all confidence and hope dropped like a heavy sack into his stomach. He gulped, fighting off the frantic urge to fight against the hold of his captors and run. But he's strapped to the chair before he has the chance.

Then they leave... and he's all alone, staring at the blank screen like it's a ghost who he's not sure is there to kill him or not.

It isn't until the door opens again that he can tear his gaze away. The sight is an initial breath of relief that only escalates into debilitating panic as the pieces of this living nightmare slowly slot together. There he sees a frighteningly familiar sight of Richard Parker with Peter clutched in his arms. The boy's body visibly shakes as his head rests on the man's shoulders, a large pair of headphones resting on top of his matted, and dirty hair.

Tony bucks once like he was expecting to be able to leap from the chair, but the restraints were tighter today and all it did was aggravate his injured arm and hand.

“Peter,” he whispers, voice cracking slightly. He hates himself so much, god he's such a pitiful excuse for a man. But the sight of his son in that man's arms... having repeatedly watched this very scene over and over and over again every night. *God, this couldn't be happening.*

He must have been imagining things but he swears he sees the remnants of a genuine pitying smile on Parker's face before the man is gently patting Peter's back and urging him to sit up, and then

reaching to remove the headphones. Peter cries harder.

“Peter,” Tony says again, louder, more desperate now that the boy can hear him.

Please let Peter hear him.

And Peter looks up, neck snapping to attention and head swiveling to face Tony. And one look has the boy erupting into tears, immediately flailing in Parker’s arm in a desperate attempt to reach him.

“Daddy!” He cries, arms outstretched and hands straining to grab hold of him. Tony pushes against the tight straps around his arms and legs. “Daddy p’ease!”

Richard keeps them from getting any closer, slowly shushing Peter with comforting sounds and gentle strokes. “Peter now what did we just talk about?”

Peter shakes his head violently. “No!” He slaps Richard in the face. “No no nO!”

Tony’s chest twists and a low pitched gurgle of distress escapes his mouth.

“Peter,” Richard scolds gently, and Peter sobs. Hard, but he doesn’t lash out and Richard begins to settle the headphones over his ears. “Let me talk to Tony for a moment and I’ll let you go to him.”

Peter nods and Tony’s brain seems to short circuit for a moment when Richard turns his attention onto him.

“So, I’ve come to a realization,” he starts out. “You’ve had Peter for a few months and he’s obviously very attached to you, so that’s going to make my plan for the future a bit difficult. I can’t have him blabbing to everyone he sees that I’m not his father and that he’s been taken from you. And I definitely can’t risk him running off to look for you when he gets older, because as much as you like to think I’m a monster of a father, I don’t want to see him get hurt. So, lucky for us, he’s only known you a little while and he’s still very young and impressionable.”

Tony feels a bit of relief, knowing that Parker had no intention of killing him just yet, but his insinuations don't bode well with him. “What are you saying?”

“I need you to summon those inner acting chops of yours and make a convincing argument. I think he deserves to finally know the truth.” Richard fixes him with a menacing look. “You’re not his father, you don’t love him, and these past few months meant nothing and you were only using him to get to me.”

Tony growls at him. “You go straight to hell.”

Richard frowns. “I don’t think you have much room to argue, Stark.”

Tony hesitates, looking between Peter and Richard.

“I’ll answer a few questions, but I’m not going to tell *my son* that I don’t love him.”

“Oh yes, I fully intend for you to do that after we’re done with this. I’d say it’d be for the well deserved thank you for not killing him like my brother wished me to do in the first place. Don’t you think?”

Tony gulped, “He’d never believe me anyways.”

Richard chuckles. “He’ll believe you,” he walks over to the TV and picks up the remote. “You’ll

make a convincing argument I'm sure. Because if you don't, you and Peter won't be the only one paying the price." The screen flickers on to reveal grainy footage of Harley. Face bruised, nose and mouth bloody as he kneels on the floor with his hands bound behind his back. Swaying back and forth, eyes hazy like he wasn't all there just yet. There were three guards, and one held a pistol in his hand while the other held the kid upright with a hand knotted in his hair.

Tony couldn't look away and he felt the pressure build behind his eyes.

"You think I enjoyed having to tell my son the truth about his mother?" Richard started speaking again. "I didn't tell him for a reason, Stark. A child should not have to be weighed down by knowledge like that. I may have unconventional methods, but I care for him even despite the fact he is not fully mine."

Tony scowled at him, tears finally wetting his eyes. The sting is sharp and he blinks rapidly to keep them from falling. "Do you have no empathy at all?" It's an honest question that he's been wondering a lot about. "Can you not understand that maybe you aren't what's best for Peter. I've worked harder than I ever have to be a good father, and I'd give my life up to ensure my kids stay safe. And I don't think I could say the same about you. So stop excusing this shit as you trying to be a good father! You weren't! Suck it up and accept it, you're a shit Dad and it was obvious enough that Peter resented you the *moment* he experienced kindness and human decency. We both know what this is really about, so don't lie to my face."

He can see the anger as it builds in Richard.

"Like I said Stark, my methods are unconventional, but you and I want the same thing. Everything I've done to Peter has been for his benefit. He needs to learn, and he needs to be kept safe. I didn't just pump him with drugs for no reason! I didn't give him *anything* that I didn't already give to myself. Now we aren't going to discuss this any further. If you can't convince Peter of what I've told you, then I'll let my brother's men have his way with that child in there and make you watch. Do we have a deal?"

Tony nods and Richard removes the headphones from Peter's ears once more as he clicks the TV off to avoid Peter seeing. He makes a small gesture and a guard comes forward to release one of Tony's arms and then gently sets Peter on his bruised abdomen. The boy doesn't hesitate to scramble forward and lock his arms around Tony's neck, whimpering and sobbing as he squeezes hard. Tony hugs him back just as fiercely, using the good arm they freed to hold the boy close as he presses his nose into the kid's hair, allowing a tear or two to escape. "I'm sorry, Peter. I'm so sorry." He whispers.

"Stark!" Richard barks. "Why don't you tell Peter the truth now."

Tony paused, he didn't even know where to begin. He didn't let go of Peter, but he glanced towards the now blank screen that had shown Harley kneeling on the floor and he suddenly felt sick.

He gently pushed Peter off him, ignoring the desperate cries and begging. "Daddy no! Daddy-Daddy-Daddy." Peter reached for him desperately, face puckered and shining with tears and snot. And Tony gulped.

"I'm not your Dad Peter," he scolded, voice pitching down in a soft crack towards the end. And the betrayal on Peter's face broke him. "I never wanted to be your Dad."

Peter's mouth quivers as fresh tears fall from his shining eyes. "What?" He whimpers.

“It was all pretend, Peter. I’m not your Dad.”

“But-but, you *are* .” Peter argues, pushing against the hand Tony has braced on his shoulder to keep him away, fighting to crawl closer. “You are! You love me! ”

And just as Tony opens his mouth, it feels like his throat closes around a sharp rock and he nearly chokes as he says “no, I don’t.”

Peter stares at him and Tony can see when the words finally sink in.

So, he takes a deep breath and musters up control of his emotions. He doesn’t want to spend the next thirty minutes doing this. It’d just torture the both of them. The quicker he has Peter convinced, the quicker they’d be done, the sooner Harley would be safe, and the sooner he can get back to his plan so he can rescue his boys, hold Peter and whisper apology after apology into his hair until he believes it was all a lie.

“I never loved you Peter. What, you think a man like me has time to love a kid like you? I was just using you to make your real Dad hurt. You and Harley are not my kids and I’m not your Dad.” He can’t look Peter in the face after that, so instead he turns to Richard. He’s sure his eyes are red, but he knows he hasn’t let himself cry.

“Get him off me,” he orders quickly before Peter can try to hug him again and Tony inevitably breaks under the pressure. “Now.” His voice cracks after that one.

“No,” Peter whispers, sobbing softly. He reaches to grab Tony’s hand desperately. “Was I bad? I be good!” He screams, eyes widening when he sees Richard approach, and he scrambles to grab hold of Tony. “Daddy I be so good! P’ease! DADDY!” Richard lifts him away from Tony and Peter screeches, body going completely feral in Richard’s arms in deliberate protest. “Daddy! No! NO! Daddy I be GOOD! I sorry! I sorry! I be GOOD!”

And just like that Richard whisks him out of the room, and the tension Tony had forced onto his body breaks and the dam finally floods over. The guard has to wrestle his hand away from his face to tie him back down.

“You better hope that stuck Stark. Even I don’t want to see that again.”

Richard was back, but Tony didn't look up at him.

Then the screen is back on, and Harley’s still kneeling, but this time looking much more alert.

And Tony doesn’t fight anymore. He answers Richard’s questions as vaguely as he possibly can, defeated and sullen. It’s not like what he was even asking the right questions to begin with, so what was the point of putting his kids in danger?

After an hour he’s brought back down the hall, to his room. They shove him in and he doesn’t even put up a fight. He simply falls to his knees and lays on the cold ground and finally lets the tears slip through.

Chapter End Notes

Ok so I know this whole chapter probably brings to light more questions than it answers, but you should all know by now that I have a tendency to do this. Next

chapter more questions will be answered hopefully.

And also, I understand that Tony may be acting a bit unconventional in these situations since he has experience with the whole kidnapping and torture thing and should be all tough and stoic and whatever. But keep in mind that I've whumped this guy so hard. Like, I kinda feel sorry about it. He's going through a lot. Let him cry and be sad okay. He doesn't have to be tough all the time. He's a soft dad now and he just wants to cuddle his kids but he can't. So be easy on him.

Annnd i feel like there were a few more things to say, but I can't think of them right now. I know you probably didn't enjoy the angst and I apologize, but c'mon if it were all rainbows and unicorns have of you guys wouldn't still be reading. So let's embrace the whumptober. I'll try to finish up all the angst this month (key word: try) that way we can just excuse all this whump as me participating in the trend. Yeah? Great.

As always, thank you guys for reading and I hope to hear from you. Again, I apologize for the long waits between updates, but you know, life's shit sometimes. So, yeah, thanks! Love y'all to pieces!

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

I don't think y'all are ready for this one, but I'm gonna give it to you anyways.

The end parts are a bit graphic... so tread lightly.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

One Day Earlier

“Loki! We cannot just sit here and do nothing! Stark needs our help!” Thor bellows, chasing after his brother as the man rushes to and fro in search of sector leaders to try and regain some semblance of control of their districts.

Finally, Loki whirls around, officially fed up after one too many of Thor’s outbursts and sneers. “You think I don’t want to help, Brother?”

Thor doesn’t answer, only hardens his glare as he stands in front of his brother with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I would love nothing more than to go kick those Nazi asses, but in case you haven’t noticed, we’ve got work to do,” he gestures his arms out wide.

Ever since word of the failed proceedings during Tony’s trial, things changed. Crime and violence immediately resurfaced with the people’s knowledge that Anthony Stark was no longer going to be around to enforce his rules. The police had no control over the sudden anarchy that ran rampant in the streets, and the innocents were suffering. They hadn’t the need to lock their doors, or care about leaving the house at night in years. Then this sudden change shook the foundation of the reality of their lives and what used to be. It’s done nothing more than panic them.

And panic has a tendency to screw with people’s thinking. Soon, once good hearted people are led down paths ending in nothing more than crimes of desperation. It was a symbiotic destruction of sorts. Crime and violence breeds fear and panic, and fear and panic breeds crime and violence. Just as a sense of security brings about peace and peace brings about a sense of security.

Oh the irony of human nature.

So it did not take long before there was no order. Panic was not a healthy state and it did not bode well with self-control and common decency. The people had officially said ‘*fuck it*’ to the rules in retaliation to the chaos, and unless they were able to get things under control soon, more damage would be done than they would be able to fix. Twelve years of The Stark’s hard work would go down the drain, and the people’s faith in their ability to keep them safe would pass on with it.

They had plans preparing them for potential uprisings, but none that could have prepared them for one this extensive. Now, it was only a matter of organizing the widespread campaign. Their numbers would be stretched thin in order to ensure all corners of the country would be reached. And they’re short of hand. They lost more than Thor would be comfortable in admitting, either out of the fear similar to what was being felt by the public or in the simultaneous attack on their base

from the few insurgence that had been plotting in town, alongside Hydra. Thankfully, their father Odin has been more than willing to offer loyal soldiers of his own to gain back the peace and control.

“I’m well aware,” Thor narrowed his eyes, grunting in disdain. “But our efforts here would be moot if Stark ended up dying. There’s been no word from Rhodes; we have no idea how many soldiers are left in America. The least we should do is send help.”

“Domencio went.” Loki answered briskly, turning at the waist when he spotted an older Capo scutter by. Calling out to him with quick instruction to compile a team and head for their base in Sicily.

“Artino?!” Thor dropped the volume of his words, but the intensity of his inquiry remained.

“Yes.”

Thor narrows his eyes. “Why? What is he going to do?”

Loki scoffs at him and crosses his arms over his chest. “You didn’t think Stark would just befriend some random baker and vigneron off the streets and invite him into our home for an exclusive ceremony, did you? There is obviously some connection there that we aren’t aware of. He would not have come to me for directions to Stark Tower if he did not have the intent and capability in assisting Stark get back home safely. For all we know he’s more capable than either of us. Now, *please*, help me get this under control. We don’t have much time.”

Thor still wasn’t pleased, but he turned to do just that, but he was stopped when he felt his wrist vibrate with the pattern to accompany an emergency message and he glanced down. His face paled and he felt his chest squeeze as angry tears pricked at his eyes and his mouth turned down in an angered scowl.

“The boys,” he growls softly, back facing his brother, but Loki paused to look at him.

“What?”

Thor turns, looking back at him. “They took the boys. And Pepper. Hydra has them.”

Loki’s mouth falls open, eyes wide, but he’s silent.

Thor looked back down at the watch. “JARVIS was able to send one last transmission before his systems shut down.”

Loki still looked dazed. But then he finally spoke, voice and face steely.

“We’ll finish here, and then we’ll go,” he states definitively. “Like you said, they’ll need all the help they can get.”

Harley grumbles when he’s woken by Peter’s incessant stirring for what could possibly be the fifth time that night. The kid was a ridiculously restless sleeper and it’s been driving him *insane*. He didn’t know how their parents could put up with it. The child ended up sleeping sideways by the end of most nights with his big ass head crammed against his ribs.

“God, kid, Mom and Dad must really love you,” he grumbles as he manhandles Peter’s dead weight off him. He removes the tiny elbow wedged against his neck and pushes Peter’s face, so his open mouth isn’t constantly huffing smelly hot air into his own. God, he loves the kid, but he

doesn't think he can take another week of sharing a bed with this child. Nonetheless, he arranged Peter so he looked more comfortable, then adjusted the blanket wrapped around him and pulled him closer when he noticed the slight shivering.

He could feel the slight chill in the room also, but it wasn't that bad. Just about the same temperature it was during the day, but with the lack of the extra layer of his long sleeve button up, it tended to feel a bit cooler, especially at night. Peter was currently using his overshirt. He'd wet himself the night before after a pretty terrible nightmare which had left him sobbing and begging for Tony. Harley had felt damn helpless as he did his best to soothe his brother, but eventually Peter just ended up crying himself back to sleep. So, after he had passed out Harley carefully undressed him and stacked all of Peter's soaked clothes by the door along with the blanket. The next morning the clothes were gone, and he assumed some guards had taken it to be washed just like they had on the first night when he'd mucked up his shirt and the carpet with his sick. Harley hopes they would have it back by tomorrow so he could get his overshirt and personal blanket back.

So, he slips back to sleep, using one of his legs to pin down Peter's, so the kid's heels don't end up pressed uncomfortably into his thighs by morning by his unending flailing.

Harley wakes up again to the sound of the loud metal clang of the door closing and he tightens his hold on Peter just slightly as he looks up in minor panic. He knew he had to be ready. He doesn't know what their plan was for them, and he doesn't want to start getting comfortable with someone coming in and out of their room while they're sleeping. Sure, so far they've taken pretty decent care of them. It wasn't really the treatment he was expecting to receive as a kidnapped victim, but he's not complaining. Three square meals a day and a plethora of books to help keep Peter entertained and distracted during the day was definitely something he was thankful for. But being given those things didn't mean he had the privilege to let his guard down. He had to always be on alert... and despite how good they've been treated so far, they've been kidnapped which means there is an unknown intent soon to follow these meaningless peace offerings. But when he looks at the door, he's happy to find a small stack of clothes next to the wall, neatly folded and pressed like they were in a goddamned hotel.

See, this is exactly why he's not sure of what to think of these bastards.

He gently shakes Peter awake.

"Ha'ley no," he whines softly. "Still s'leeping."

Harley smiles and rolls his eyes.

"C'mon you little gremlin. Let's get you dressed in some fresh clothes then you can go back to sleep, okay?"

Peter nods and slowly sits up, lifting a fist to rub the sleep from his eyes and lifting his other arm towards Harley to be lifted from the cot.

Harley, of course, having been spoiling him as best he could since they've arrived, complies and picks him up, carrying him over to the door to pick up the clothes then heading to the rug they had woken up on their first day. He sets Peter on his feet smiling at the way his shirt drowns the tiny boy, just like Tony's clothes would drown him. The thought of Tony whisks away his admiring smile and he looks away as he reaches over to grab his brother's underwear from the pile.

Thankfully the shirt fit him much like a dress, hiding any incriminating sights from whatever perverts might've been spying on them through the cameras in the room.

Peter uses a hand on Harley's shoulder to steady himself as his brother helps him step into his underwear and pants. Then Harley begins unbuttoning the shirt and slipping the baggy shirt off the kid's shoulders. Then Peter lifts his arms for his own shirt and pullover sweater to be pulled over his head and he leaves his arms up until his brother lifts him up and carries him back to the bed.

Just as Harley lifts him into his arms, the door swings open and in only seconds they're swarmed by helmeted soldiers with very large odd looking guns pointed directly at them, shouting and hollering for Harley to put Peter down.

"Put him down!"

"Put the child down!"

Peter cries, of course, and only clings tighter to Harley.

And Harley doesn't even think to let him go, twisting his body to shield Peter from the soldiers. But more just kept swarming in, surrounding them and boxing them in. Harley didn't know what to do. His breathing picked up. He wasn't about to put Peter down. No way. He'd never listen to these shitheads, especially when it came to Peter. He'd never forgive himself if he let them do something to Peter.

The soldier in front of him stepped forward, lifting the gun to point directly at his face. Peter hides against his shoulder.

"Put the child down." His voice was thick with an unfamiliar accent. Harley stared at him, trying to discern their intentions, but he didn't have any more time because soon two more soldiers were flanking both his sides, yanking at his arms and pulling Peter from his grip with a sharp tug.

Peter shrieks, face bright red as his fists and legs hit and kick his captor with unrelenting fervor. Harley dives to grab him back with a loud yell. "Give him back you assholes!"

He's grabbed around the waist, reeled further away from Peter. He elbows whoever held him right in the gut and even through the heavy padding he's able to land a heavy hit and he hears a sharp grunt. So he does it again, then hooks his leg behind his assailants ankles and shoves him. Hard. The man falls, losing his hold when Harley jerks away. Then he leaps for Peter again, blood roaring in his ears and muscles spasming with adrenaline, but this time he freezes midstep. Body going rigid for a moment before he feels the first tremor ride up his gut. His throat flares with pain and he can't breathe. It wasn't like a panic attack... there was something stuck in his throat and it only seemed to grow bigger by the second. And he couldn't *breathe*. He opens his mouth, but he can only release a breathless gasp before he feels the warmth of blood trickle past his lips and down his chin. Then he falls, losing all control of his legs as he collapses on the floor, his entire body convulsing as he feels sharp shocks trail repeatedly up and down his spine, shorting out any effort to move or speak beyond his incomprehensible murmurings. His ears ring and his chest aches, and he barely has time to spot Peter in the chaos as the guard holding him drags him from the room.

A parting feels of dread being his final thought before everything goes black.

Peter cried. Hard. Then he screamed and kicked frantically in an effort to break the hold his captor had on him. His brother was *hurt*. They had hurt his brother!

"Put me DOWN!" He shrieked, words pattering off into a high-pitched screech of its own as his body went completely rigid, throwing his head back into the man's collarbone. He was not being

taken away *again* . No, no, *no* .

He felt the arm around his chest loosen just slightly before tightening to the point where it was painful and a struggle to even breathe. But that didn't stop him. He needed to get back to his brother! He needed to get back there and help him before the bad men could hurt him anymore. First they take away his Daddy. Then his Mommy... they are not taking away his *brother* .

So he screamed again. His face felt heated and he could feel the tears streaming down his cheeks in flaming rivulets. Then mustering all his strength, he rears back, sending his heels flying somewhere soft and probably very unwanted. The man holding him stumbled, almost falling to his knees and Peter took that opportunity to rear his head back once more, coming into sharp contact with either the man's chin or his nose, he's not sure, and he doesn't care. And then one hard bite to the arm was all the more he needed to swiftly squeeze out of the man's hold and bolt.

He sprinted as fast as he could, heart pounding as he struggled to remember the way back to the room he'd been taken from. He'd been so busy fighting he didn't take the time to remember. But he kept running. He heard the shouts from behind him and the sound of quick, heavy footsteps, but he didn't dare look behind him, he only pushed his small legs harder, willing them to keep from stumbling.

He hears the footsteps getting closer though, and he panicked. They were loud and scary and Peter didn't know how to describe the absolute terror that filled him by the thought of getting caught again. So he turned, scrambling around the next corner in hopes it would somehow give him a slight advantage. And that must have been the right choice because just a little ways down he could see the gathering of some of the bad men that had come to take him away. That must be where Harley was.

Peter should've probably thought more about a plan, but it wasn't like he had much time for one of those. So he simply dived into the chaos, hoping he might be lucky enough that no one would grab him. He pushed by four, maybe five, before he was lifted off his feet abruptly, just barely getting a glimpse of his older brother sprawled on the floor with blood pouring from his mouth and ears, eyes wide open, lifeless and unblinking... and Peter screamed.

There was blood... and he wasn't moving and he looked *hurt* . Peter felt his heart sink as he registers the uncanny similarities between a memory from long ago. Of his mother, sprawled on the ground, with blood on her chest. Dead.

He shrieked, writhing violently in whoever's arms this must be. His brother couldn't be dead. He just couldn't be! Daddy would never let someone hurt him or Harley! He would never! Harley can't be dead. It just wasn't possible.

And, again, he's whisked away and he's not sure whether he's happy he doesn't have to see his brother so hurt, or if he's angry he wasn't there in time to save him from the bad men.

So, now he sobs, completely clueless of what he should do. He was all alone now... and if Daddy couldn't save Harley, what did that mean for him?

"You must be Peter." Peter sniffles, and is somehow able to open his eyes and see through the heavy torrent of tears to look at the man standing in front of him and the one holding him. His body stutters with uncontrollable sobs and for some reason he had trouble catching his breath. The man in front of him wore a weird cloth over most of his face which only made him look even more scary, and Peter cried harder, surrendering his fight from earlier and going lax in whoever's arms he ended up in.

And then he was transferred to the arms of the strange man that had spoken, and he didn't fight it.

"I saw you caused some trouble, hm? Why's that?"

And Peter thought that maybe this man would be nice. He didn't look mean or scary besides the weird cloth on his nose and mouth and the scars all over his face. But Daddy had a big scar on his cheek, and Happy had tons on his forehead and cheeks too and they weren't mean... So, Peter gently wipes his nose and his chest stuttering sobs slow into a consistent pattern.

"My b'other." Peter eventually stutters out, but the words have his face screwing up and reigniting his violent cries once more. "He-he-he hurrrrt!" He sobs.

The man starts walking. Farther and farther away from his brother.

"You must love your brother very much." He states and Peter nods aggressively leaning forward to wipe his nose on the man's shirt.

"Y'know I have a brother too. He's my little brother."

Peter looks up at him, sniffing through a few more tears. "Really?"

Maybe the man wasn't so bad.

"Yep. And you know him."

Peter's eyes widen and he's suddenly very curious.

"I do?"

He thinks he might see the man smile. The corners of his eyes crinkle up and the wrinkles in his forehead show up a bit more, but the cloth remains over his mouth.

"Yeah. I'm your Dad's older brother."

Peter gasped, hope suddenly sparking in his veins and he felt an insurmountable charge of trust and safety wash over him and he collapsed against the man and cried in relief, clutching tight to the man's jacket. "Daddy?"

"Yeah, would you like to see him?"

Peter nods frantically, chanting a small desperate mantra of "daddy, daddy, daddy" before his relieved cries overtake him once more. He doesn't know how long it is before the man stopped walking. And Peter immediately snapped his eyes open, clearing away any tears as he frantically moved his head around in search of his dad. Tears welled in his eyes when he was met with nothing more than the same looking hallway with a tiny indentation of an open room to the left. He turns his gaze back onto the man holding him, hoping he hadn't mistaken some trick for sincerity.

"He's meeting us here. Don't worry kid." The man pats his back, none too kindly Peter would admit. A little harsh and Nothing like Tony or Uncle Rhodey, or even Happy, but he doesn't pay it much mind because the man saved him! And he's bringing him to his Daddy.

"Mr?" He asks softly, still sniffing a bit. "Do-"

"I'm your Uncle Ben," the man interrupts and Peter pauses, then starts again.

"Uncle Ben... do'ya think you could help my b'other too. I think he got hurt, and my Daddy

p'obably wan's to see him too."

The man-- his uncle Ben, makes a weird face. Peter can only see his eyes though, and just judging by that he doesn't think his question was very well received.

"He's being punished right now, Peter."

Peter startles just a bit. The tone Uncle Ben was using didn't sound as nice as it had been sounding before... and his eyes weren't looking very nice anymore either. "What he do?"

Uncle Ben didn't look like he was going to answer. At first Peter frowned at that, and then he noticed a soft flash take place behind him and he shuffled around in the man's arms to look at the wall behind him. And it took him all of a second to recognize the person on the other side of the large window that hadn't been there seconds ago. He screams with elated relief, straining in Ben's arms to reach for the window.

"Daddy!" He cries desperately, but his Daddy doesn't respond. Then strong hands wrap around his wrist and pull them back to his side a bit forcefully, and he doesn't think much at all about the bruising grip as he stares at his father. He's lying on a weird bed-like chair, staring across the room with half-lidded eyes. Dried blood on his chapped lips and all over his face and arms. He had no shirt, which only revealed the once faded scars on his torso and chest that Peter was used to seeing were now red and inflamed. His pants looked dirty and frail, and just overall his Daddy looked so different.

He cried harder, this time a bit of distress creeping its way through. "Daddy?" He tried again, straining to lean closer to the glass so the man might be able to hear him.

His dad looked skinnier than he last saw him, paler too.

Then he was being turned away and he screamed louder in protest. A hand quickly swatted his mouth and he was startled into silence. "Quit that nonsense!"

Peter's eyes widened in shock.

Then he noticed an all too familiar figure rushing towards them from down the hall and he jolted back in an instinctual drive to get away.

"Ben? I didn't know you were the one delivering him." His father spoke and Peter could feel his breathing pick up at the sound of his old Daddy's voice. His heart was racing and he found himself clutching the sleeve of Ben, scared that the man might hand him over to the wrong Daddy.

"Yeah, he got away. Feisty little punk aren't ya, Pete?" Peter felt himself being jostled, but any words he spoke were ignored; he was too focused on watching his father's movements, making sure he wasn't getting any closer. Then he was being offered out to the man he wished long ago to drop dead and he shrieked, loud and panicked, and he kicked his feet wildly in an effort to get away.

"Hey!" He was pulled back into Ben's chest again and only had a few moments to be grateful before he was being swatted on the mouth a little harder. "I told you to quit that."

"Now, be a good boy and go see your Dad. I'm tired of holding you."

He offered Peter out to his father again and Peter shook his head violently. "Not my Dad! NOt my Daddy! NO! NO! NOT MY DADDY!" He kicked his father's hands away when they reached for him again, and that time Ben wasn't the one to scold him and a familiar scowl found it's way on

his father's face.

"Peter!" He scolded. And for some reason he froze, suddenly pliant and allowing his father to take him into his arms as if he were in some type of trance that did not allow him to disobey. His eyes burned and so did his nose, and his mouth was all of a sudden tasting sour and all he wanted to do was scream again, but he knew he couldn't.

"God, Stark has ruined you. I'm going to make one thing clear, alright?" Richard lectures him, standing just outside a door. A door Peter hopes would by some miracle allow him to see his real Daddy. "You are not to move or say anything until I tell you so. I don't want to see or hear any screaming or crying. You're a big boy and you need to act like one. And I don't want to ever hear you calling Stark your father again, do I make myself clear?" Peter gulps, lip trembling pitifully. "I said, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes' sir," Peter mumbles helplessly through a tight sob he was trying really hard to make go away.

And then a large pair of headphones were forced over his ears and a large hand settled over the back of his head which then forced his face into his father's shoulder. He tried to keep from crying... he really did. He didn't want to be with this man he used to call his father.

He wanted Tony. His *real* Daddy. He always made Peter feel safe.

When Harley wakes again, it's in less than ideal circumstances. At first he's not completely aware of what's going on, but as his vision clears a bit and his senses come back to him it didn't take him very long to figure out their intentions. The guards were still there; they still had their weird guns.

He's forced off the floor with a bruising hand around his arm and a subsequent slap to the face.

Rude .

"Open your eyes."

It's still hazy... but he doesn't really want to not listen after that whole ordeal. So he forces his eyes to remain open and balances his body upright on his knees.

"Where's my brother?" He croaks, coughing at the rough scratch tearing at the tender flesh in his throat.

That was apparently enough to earn him another slap... The force behind it threw him to the floor. He coughed up a few more globs of blood, spitting it onto the floor and wincing slightly as he caught his breath. Then he's hauled back up with another strong arm.

He kneels there, in the middle of the floor surrounded by masked guards and waits. Nothing happens for a good ten minutes before he dares to open his mouth again.

"Where's my brother—" He barely has time to get the words out before he's hit again. Hard.

"Shut up!"

Harley scowls, hands braced against the floor and he glares up at the armored dude beside him.

"I just asked a question you dick."

That one earned a kick. And, *god* ... that hurt.

He rolled onto his side, clutching his side as he groans.

“I said shut up.” The voice is muffled by the mask, but Harley can hear him loud and clear and, well... he’s pretty smart. He doesn’t open his mouth again, as much as he may want to.

He’s forced to kneel there for who knows how long, and he thinks he might be sporting a couple new bruises, but oh well. Nothing he isn’t used to. He’s more worried about where they’d taken Peter and what they were doing to him.

Just when the drowsiness tapers off, a bag is shoved over his head. Or, something was at least, he assumes it’s a bag, ‘cause y’know... kidnappers. That’s a pretty stereotypical move.

He’s guided to his feet then, out the door, two grips on either of his arms as they continue walking him somewhere. Who knows where. In the back of his mind he hopes they might be bringing him to Peter... that way at least he’d *know* .

He does count his steps though. He’s not *that* stupid. If they took enough time to shove a bag over his head they obviously didn’t want him to remember where they were going. And they’ve *obviously* underestimated him.

Twenty-three steps. Right. Seventy-two. Right. Thirty. Stop. Left. Two —Oh they’re here.

The door opens and the bag is suddenly torn off his head as he’s shoved into the room. Clearing the threshold just as the doors clang shut behind him.

“Harley!” His neck snaps over at the familiar voice and he finds his mother struggling to sit up on the bed.

“Mom!” He runs forward, rushing into her arms and hugging her tight. And *instantly* he felt the tension leave and for the first time all week he felt safe. He scrambled to clutch her tighter, pressing his face into her neck, breath shuddering as it leaves his mouth. “Mama.”

Pepper strokes his hair, face in his curls as she kisses him repeatedly with tears in his eyes, whispering soft reassurances into his hair.

“Oh baby,” she whispers, “are you okay?” She pulls him away, cradling his face in her hands. Her thumbs gently wipe away the fresh tears trailing down the blooming bruises beneath his eyes.

Harley frowns, repressing the urge to break down any further than he already has. He bites down hard on his lips and adverts his gaze to the floor shamefully. “They took Peter.”

Pepper’s hand doesn’t halt in combing softly through his hair. “Who did, honey?”

Harley cracks, pressing forward to hide his face in her collar. “The-the guards. They took him! I tried to stop him; I did, I promise. But-but there were just so many and-and I couldn’t...” he chokes on his own words.

“It’s not your fault, baby.” He can feel Pepper’s tears drop into his hair as she pulls him up so they’re both sitting on the bed.

“What’re we gonna do?”

“I’m working on it sweetheart. We’ll find a way out of here, okay? We’ll find your brother and when we get back home we’ll all curl up on the couch and watch movies all day.”

“Dad too? You think he’s okay?” He ends up squeezing closer as he allows himself to think the horrid thoughts he’d been avoiding for days.

Pepper pauses and Harley can feel her shift and he can tell she’s going to fib the biggest fib she’s ever fibbed.

“Of course he’s okay,” she soothes. “Dad’s dealt with this so many times, he knows exactly what to do. He’s something of an expert when it comes to this stuff, actually,” she teased. “In fact, I would bet anything that he’s already made plans to come and bring us home safe and sound. As much as I hate being the damsel in distress, I can’t deny that your father is the best hero I’ve ever met.”

That doesn’t really make him feel better. That’s the same lie he’s been telling Peter since their arrival.

“I wish he were here.” As soon as he says it he feels bad... he’s basically told her she wasn’t good enough to make him feel safe, but that wasn’t what he meant! He just misses Tony. He wants to know he’s okay. Plus, the man has so much confidence and such an aura of resilience and determination you can’t help but believe anything he says, whether you know it to be a lie or not.

“I know sweetheart,” Pepper simply responds, without any sense of displeasure. “I wish he were too, but don’t worry... I’ve had my fair share of experience. It’s just a bit more difficult now that I’m not only fighting for myself anymore.” One hand lays on her swollen belly and the other rubs his back.

“I can help,” Harley sits up, a resolute look fixing itself across his face. He wipes his eyes quickly. “I-I was just a bit overwhelmed, but I can help now. I promise.”

Pepper smiles at him, reaching up to gently sweep away the stray curl that had fallen in his face. “I know sweetheart. I’m going to need all the help I can get.” She glances around the room quickly before looking back at him with a small smile then falls silent.

In the next room, Ben watches the interaction with a disgusted scowl. He glances down at the pager on his belt and turns to leave, shouldering past the couple guards assigned to monitor the room while he mutters under his breath with heated irritation.

“” *Dad* ” ?” He scoffs, shoving the door open *hard* . “That disrespectful little twit.” He growls under his breath. “When I get through with him, he’ll know who his real father is.” He passes several individuals in the hall as he makes his way to the location he’d been requested at. Which just so happens to be the room Barnes had been relocated to. He had made quite the mess of his last one. What, with all the vomiting and blood. It just got to a point where no matter how much bleach they used, the stench still lingered.

He’s caught on the arm by his brother and he puffs up in agitation as he swings around to face him, jerking his arm out of his grasp with a harsh tug. “What?” He snaps.

Richard shoots him a tiny glare before shoving his tablet in Ben’s face.

“What the hell am I looking at?” He retorts after a good two seconds trying to decipher the foreign looking graphs and vitals displayed.

Richard gets all in his space again as he enthusiastically explains things so quickly Ben’s not sure if he even understands it any better.

“I just came back from Stark’s room... I got an idea from him and now It’s *working*.” Richard eventually exhales with an enlivened smile. “I modified a slightly different technique using Stark’s original format. Instead of physically rewiring the connections between his prefrontal cortex and the amygdala to reestablish his personal sense of judgement through constantly assessing and readapting computerized procedures to ensure his coded conviction remains consistent, I’ve taken a more psychological approach. I’m focusing on his core memory network in the hippocampal area and the neurons responsible for mentalizing and performance monitoring in his medial and right prefrontal cortex--.”

Ben, glances up at him and lowers his brows. He had never been too fond of the fact that his brother was so smart. It gave an advantage over him. Also, that excessive word-vomiting was very annoying.

Richard noticed the look on his brother’s face and switched gears. Opting away from such technical terms he knows his brother couldn’t give a flying hoot about. Well... he tried to at least. He couldn’t very well properly explain such a complex issue using exclusively small words.

“Um-- well, there is a psychological concept called counterfactual thinking that is mostly responsible for our ability to think and reason independently based on rationality and prior experience. It’s basically our brain going through the process of saying, “if I do this, this will happen, and if I do that, that will happen.” and learning from those results for next time. This, combined with our natural sense of mentalization, forms our personal sense of self and beliefs and the actions we follow as a result. We learn from the consequences of our actions and others’ actions via closely monitoring them and—most of the time—we adapt our behaviour accordingly. If Barnes kept these performance monitoring processes which are easily influenced by the social factors exposed to him it would complicate our ability to ensure that anything we put into Barnes’ head would stick after we put him back out into the field without a constant reapplication or restoration. He would simply redevelop his own sense of self over time. So, I’ve removed it.”

Ben wasn’t 100% following, but he thinks he might have the general idea. He wasn’t a *complete* idiot after all.

“So, you’re looking to hotwire his brain and keep him from thinking for himself? Hate to break it to you Parker, but if he can’t go about convincing Stark that he’s the same person, this plan of ours won’t work. A social retard won’t do us any good. Stark’s not *that* stupid.”

“I understand that, and I’m still working at it. But I’m confident there is a way to avoid the result of him becoming something of a social outcast. If I do it right, Barnes would keep his episodic memories, albeit slightly skewed, to maintain the construct of his current personality. But as long as we can institute a firm foundation of our own in his subconscious, it can override any prior sense of action or behavior from before. Instead, using new memories to influence the ones from the past and taking the place of his previous ability of rationalization. Everything we will put into his head, will do the thinking for him. Then, Barnes won’t need any further procedures. He’ll be loyal and pliable to our every whim while maintaining the semblance of free will and free thinking.”

Ben stares at him a moment. “So... you’re hypnotising him?”

And Richard pauses for just a moment, face puckering in thought like he hadn’t quite thought of that comparison before he mentioned it, and then he chuckled and smiled. “Yeah, I guess that’s one way to put it.”

Ben likes the sound of that and his mouth quirks up slightly. “I’d say good job little brother, but I’ll save that for when you follow through. How long for you to execute?”

“Three days,” he answers quickly, “and one more session with Stark. I need to pick his brain about this. I just need to make sure... he took quite the detour in his research to reach the same conclusion and I’m curious if I may have missed something.”

“Prenderò a calci in culo qualcuno!!” Dom slams the phone on the table and huffs. He forgot how stressful this type of work used to be, and by golly he had respect for Tonio before, but this was another level. Everyone was such a *fica* !

“What’s got your panties in a twist this time ‘round Boss Man?” The dark skinned man he’s learned to call Sam asks as he hobbles in with a crooked step to his strut. He’s a likeable young man, albeit a bit unorthodox and not to be completely trusted, or so he’s been told, but he likes him. He’s passionate.

Sam drops a tiny stack of papers in front of him and Dom kneads his knuckles into his forehead.

“Nothing Samuel,” Dom mutters, reaching for the papers. “I’ve just come to learn that Americans have not changed over the years.”

Sam snorts. “Three years ago I would’ve been offended...” he purses his lips like he’s contemplating whether he should continue with his thoughts. And Dom urges him with a gentle look as he slowly lowers the papers back to the table to give him his full attention. “But when you get screwed over by the same people you risked your life and fought to protect... you can’t help but lose a little respect. And the fact that I get more respect and help from the people I’ve always believed to be the problem,” he laughed at the absurdity of it, “well, man... sometimes you gotta fight the system when it’s not workin’ anymore.”

Dom smiles at him. “Tonio won you over finally?”

Sam shrugged. “The man’s got balls. I mean, the man’s a prick and’s got a total power complex, but I mean he’s a good guy beneath all that shit baggage. Heck, if Steve Rogers trusts him... well dang, you best believe he’s got the truest of intentions.”

Dom’s not familiar with the name, but he must be a prominent figure.

“Anyways, that’s the list you asked for. I think they’ve got everyone accounted for. We only got about 43 who got arrested, the rest fled.”

Dom takes the hint, and allows Sam to change the subject, and, again, turns his attention down to the paper. “Romanoff and Barton?”

He remembers those two specifically. They had accompanied Tonio and his family to Italy and the two had more than once joined them for a friendly meal or two.

Sam shrugs. “I don’t know. They’re not here and they weren’t brought in. My guess is they were the ones to get Coulson and his team out. Haven’t heard a word from them since.”

A loud clang sounds from above them and they both snap their gaze up towards the ceiling, Dom scrambling to reach the gun across the table surface. Years without practice had made him sloppy he hates to admit.

“Vision? What was that?”

“It was Clint Barton, sir,”

And, well, if that didn't just clear things up *perfectly* . But then there was an annoyed huff and suddenly the vent into the air shaft sprung open and down came Clint Barton himself.

"Damn, I was hoping to make a surprise entrance."

"Che cavolo?!" Dom shouts, brows furrowing closer together.

Clint narrows his eyes slightly like he was trying to piece together a puzzle. And after a couple seconds he looks just a bit confused. "Cabbage?"

And, okay... that was a bit funny. Dom couldn't help but snicker. "I see you picked up some vocabulary while visiting my home country."

Clint shrugged. "Well I mean, Stark was teaching the kids words all the time. I was bound to pick up a few myself." Then he turns his studious eye onto Dom and quirks a brow. "By the way I'm surprised to see you here Mr. Artino."

"What are you doing here?!" Sam interrupts with a glare. "Have you been here this whole time with your lazy ass lounging in the vents? Are you serious?"

Clint balked at him. "Heck no. I've only been here a few minutes. I snuck in to get your guys help in sneaking my backup inside. Nats waiting with 'em now."

"Was." A gruff voice spoke as the doors to the room flew open and in strut a very familiar face, followed by Natasha Romanoff. "You take way too damn long Barton. I lost my damn patience." The man stops halfway into the room and gives Domencio a once over.

"Carbonell," he nods, "nice to see you're not dead."

Dom smirks at him.

"I could say the same for you Fury."

"Mr. Stark."

Tony's head lolled to the side, vision hazy and muscles lacking any energy to so much as twitch a finger. The past few days have drained him of any and all vigor. Richard had happened upon the fact that, well, the experimentation he performed on advanced cellular regeneration hadn't exactly been the failure he thought it to be. He just hadn't had the patience to wait for the results. Of course, Tony didn't tell him that the success was merely the result of the drug already running through his veins he administered to himself a month ago. So, Tony took it upon himself to neglect mentioning that small fact. Goodness knows what damage Hydra, or even just Richard Parker himself, could do with that small success; best to continue leading them down the wrong path. Either way, his body was eating through any calories he happened to consume and by now has probably eaten through a heavy portion of his body fat and muscle as well.

"I have a couple more tests for today... but before I get started I have some news." Tony blinks sluggishly, staring up at the man, forcing his eyes to focus despite the nausea in his gut at seeing that sickly smirk on that smarmy bastard's face. As he speaks, Richard hooks him up to an IV to the left of the chair.

"Do you happen to remember what we discussed last time I saw you?" And yeah, Tony did. He frowned, turning his head away as he scoffed.

“Well, I’d just like you to know that you played a major part in helping me bring your vision to life.” Tony struggled to keep his eyes from revealing the horror he felt at hearing that news, but apparently he didn’t do such a great job with the way Richard’s sickly smirk leered at him. “Of course, I had to take a couple creative liberties of my own, but the endgame remains the same.”

Tony’s throat hurts like all hell, but he forces words from his mouth despite it. “The hell?” He croaks. “No’ possible.”

Richard smiles. “Well, your way, maybe not. You had way too much going on all at once. I took a more psychological approach. I got rid of all that technical stuff you’re so fond of.”

“Parker.” Tony croaks, a heated warning in his tone as Richard goes onto explain with limited detail, what his oh so genius plan was.

Richard scoffs at him, getting in his face. “What’cha gonna do ‘bout it Stark?”

Tony lifts his head just a bit to accentuate his glare. “Parker,” he croaks again, “it was complicated for a reason.” He coughs, throat stinging already and he could feel his abused flesh heat up in irritation. “You think *cough* you think I did all that for the kick of it. I spent years *cough* years and years researching and planning *cough*. It is meant to enhance and balance functions in the brain, not replace who they already are.”

Richard lifts a brow as Tony loses himself to a violent coughing fit.

“Please. You don’t have to act all high and mighty around me Stark. We both know your true intentions for this Allegiance program of yours. You wanted mindless minions.”

Tony grit his teeth and scowled. “Mindless? Not so much. Apparently you’re missing part of my research.” He coughs.

“Enlighten me.” Richard, the man with probably the worst poker face he’s ever seen, perks up at the mention of more of his research. But Tony doesn’t take the bait. He may be exhausted, starving, and quite possibly loosing any sense of thought, but he’s not stupid enough for that yet. Richard must have tacked onto his resolution to remain silent, and he scoffs like a child that didn’t get their way and turns to face the line of cabinets on the wall.

“It doesn’t matter. I already have it all figured out on my own.”

Tony doesn’t even bother to reason with him. It was a pointless effort. Like he’d care his plan was meant to diminish a person’s sense of self. It would be a sickness... one that would inevitably lead down a path of a very, very bad quality of life.

Richard clears his throat loud enough to snap Tony back into the present. The man stands over him holding a long knife and a small capsule of a very questionable looking liquid. And Tony doesn’t even flinch as the man slowly lowers the blade to his abused left arm, instead he watches with mild disinterest as Richard slowly slices his flesh open deep enough to expose the muscle and bone beneath. The blood that seeps from the wound is thicker than normal as it spills down the length of his arm. He can barely feel the sting he knew he was supposed to feel. Instead, the constant throb of the fractured bones in his hand override it as if the nerves to sense pain in that area had been completely severed from his brain.

Then, Richard starts to talk.

God, this was probably the worst part of the torture. Listening to this damn bastard’s voice. It was like nails on a chalkboard.

“Anyways, back to the real reason I came here.” He turns to carefully deposit the bloody knife on the counter then slowly begins to break off the glass needle of the sealed vile. “So far, the only injuries that have healed are flesh wounds.” He pokes at Tony’s hand and Tony’s breath hitches as his hand recoils. “Apparently, high concentrations of calcium are unable to be constructed or manipulated. Which, I’m sure with some tweaking could be rectified... but oh well.” He lifts the now opened vile to the light in the ceiling and swishes it around for a moment. “I’m still curious as to other potential injuries it may be able to fix though.”

Tony narrows his eyes suspiciously.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of MRSA before, correct? It’s the leading cause for Necrotizing fasciitis which is probably my favorite flesh eating bacterial diseases. Very dangerous.”

That didn’t sound good.

Richard slowly wipes away a large glob of blood with a cloth he had grabbed, exposing the pink muscle for just a few moments before blood obscured it once more.

“Well, I had one of the bored interns concoct a rudimentary imitation. It’s probably not near as effective as it’s counterpart, but it will get the job done.”

Tony couldn’t help but jerk his arm in protest as Richard suddenly tips the vile above his open wound and a couple drops of the sluggish liquid fall and intermix with his blood. Then Richard quickly soaks up the batch of blood that absorbed the liquid and set it aside on the counter.

“I’m curious to see how the influenced antigens might react to a bacterial infection. If it works, this could be quite the breakthrough for the medical community Tony.” He smiles wide and turns away from him to mess with the blood soaked rag.

Tony puffs breath in and out of his lungs as steadily as he could manage. He closes his eyes and leans his head back against the chair. God, he wanted nothing more than to just go home and hold his kids. Nothing more in the whole goddamned world... well... a cheeseburger would be nice too... but hugs and kids first.

Richard makes a disgruntled noise, and Tony tips his head to the side to watch the man’s form hunched over a microscope.

“I need a bigger sample size.”

He turns back to Tony again and glances down at the wound on Tony’s arm. The blood had already begun to clot.

Richard grabs a new rag and wets it, going about cleaning away any excess blood and exposing a piece of tender flesh. In a blink, he had grabbed the vile and dumped the remaining liquid into the wound.

Tony threw his head back and repressed a loud scream as his body tissue slowly absorbed it, the sting was possibly one of the worst pains he’d ever experienced. Richard smiles at him.

“And now we wait.”

Tony gulps air for a couple moments before his breath is steady again, resisting the urge to groan in discontent.

“You couldn’t have put it in the IV?” Tony mutters.

Richard smiles. "And where would be the fun in that. Plus this time we can see how long a deep laceration will take to heal. I wonder if it will leave a scar."

"You realize that would slow the process of it potentially being able to fight the infection, right?"

Richard pauses, glancing down at the gash, and Tony rolls his eyes because of course he didn't realize that.

"Well, we'll just have to wait it out." Richard huffs and spins around and marches from the room. Tony could only sigh in exasperation. He's had quite enough of the man's dramatics.

He glances at the pair of guards that stand at the door as Richard exits and he raises a brow. He supposes this will be the only peace and quiet he gets in a relatively warm room for the foreseeable future so he decides to take a little nap while he waits. He can only hope they don't plan to drag him back to that frigid room.

Turns out they didn't, because the next time he wakes he's more than just a little disoriented, but he can tell he's still sitting up in that damned chair. His entire left arm was burning, it felt. He hissed, sucking breath in through his clenched teeth as he slowly cracked his eyes open. His eyelids felt heavy and his vision took several seconds to adjust, but soon he was able to clearly make out Richard, scalpel in hand, as he carved out a piece of his now oozing flesh to sample. The man glanced up to see he had woken and he smiled.

"Ah, you're awake. How's the arm feel?"

Tony grits his teeth. "Like it's on damn fire."

"Hm." Richard hummed, gripping the small chunk of his muscle with a pair of tweezers and turning around with it to study it beneath the microscope.

Tony's jaw remained tense. The length of his arm ached like nothing he's ever felt before. Now, the constant throb of his fractured hand was pushed to the back of his mind and the fiery throbs licking up and down his limb overtook it. He took another glance down at the still open wound. Other than the section Richard had just dissected, it looked to already be healing. It was scabbing over, and it remained bright red and irritated but it wasn't gushing blood anymore at least.

Richard clicks his tongue obnoxiously. "Well, it seems the serum has no interest in fighting the infection. That's a bummer."

"Are you kidding me?!" Tony growled

"Sorry, but no. The infection has already started to eat away at your flesh and it's killing off your red and white blood cells impressively quick."

"What the *hell* Parker?!"

"Oh calm down," Richard scoffs. "You won't die for a good week or two, and these lousy asses obviously want you alive for some god knows reason so you'll be fine." He makes a big gesture around him and then sits down on a stool. "Though, before I send you back to your room I do have one last test to make." He folds one leg over the other. "We already know your healing can make minor repairs to damaged nerves... but I'm curious how it would respond to the damage of a complex neural tissue."

Tony narrows his eyes. "What are you getting at Parker."

“I think you know exactly what I’m getting at.” He smiles. “I’m going to step out of the room, because, well, just the thought of what he’s gonna do to you kinda makes me queasy.” He juts a thumb at one of the two guards by the door. “I’ll be back when the doctor has you all patched up.” And with one last smile Richard leaves once more.

As soon as the door clangs shut behind him one of the guards is approaching. The mask obscures any expression he was wearing on his face, and Tony can’t help but tug at the restraints helplessly.

Then the large man is looming over him, raising a gloved hand towards his face. Tony forces his eyelids shut in hopes it would somehow prevent what he’s assuming to come.

It doesn’t.

And it hurts.

He’s never experienced it before, but he can assume that a thumb digging into your eye never feels all that great.

The next time Richard Parker enters the room, it’s a little more than a day later. The guards are gone and Stark is still asleep. So, he takes that as an opportunity to do all the preliminary work so he doesn’t have to deal with the fuss. He first examined Stark’s left hand and arm, noticing there still hadn’t been any significant improvements to the end of the appendage. Then he examined around the dressed wound, poking and prodding around the scabbed skin only to notice a small sign of bruised skin irritation began to form. The gash would take at least two or three days to close up completely... not that Stark would even make it to that point.

Richard sighed in resignation and moved further up the body, glancing at the white patch of gauze covering the latest injury on the man’s face. The bruising was clear to see around the small patch, which didn’t give him much hope. He grimaced in anticipation and slowly peeled back the tape holding down the small gauze covering the wound, and he was sad to report that the test hadn’t been a success.

It honestly made him sick to his stomach looking at the hollow indent of the man’s crushed pupil. The whites of his eyes were caked with dry blood, along with the outer rim of the entire area. God, it was disgusting. He quickly pinched off a sample with his forceps and covered what used to be his eye as quickly as he could manage. And he moved towards the microscope, just to be sure... just to be sure all the bases had been covered before he moved forward with his plan. And sure enough, there were no active signs of enhanced regeneration of the severe nerve damage that had occurred. And, well, he wasn’t really expecting for there to be. It would have been too far of a leap, but it was just one more box to check off his research bucket list.

Just as he was prepping for his next period with Stark, there was shifting on the chair and a guttural groan, and just like that Stark was awake. Richard stayed where he was though, fingers gently cradling the small syringe he brought with him. He stared down at it with an impassive frown... it was a decision he’s thought plenty about. An epiphany almost as he had been watching the doctors mutate Barnes’ brain into a hardwired machine... using *his* method and research. It led to a choice that he knew would not lead to a promising outcome for himself if he followed through, but he knew it was the right thing to do. A sacrifice he would have to make.

So, instead of putting it off any longer he straightened his spine and readied himself to turn and face Stark one last time. “You’re awake.”

He could see the panicked struggle Tony had as he turned his head to find his body. His healthy

eye was dilated and open wide as he stared, flinching minutely every now and again from the strained effort he put on it.

“Parker, what the hell is goin’ on?” Stark’s voice was strained and raspy as his breath hitched with a slight panicked undertone. He blinked rapidly, turning his gaze once from Richard and towards the wall, then down to his feet, and back to Richard.

Richard smiled a tight smile. One Stark couldn’t fully see yet. It was a bittersweet and tired smile that spoke years of his hard work and dedication. One of surrendered care, a resignation to the man he had become; one void of honor and passion, and only driven by the fear of failure, not the eagerness to succeed. He was standing in the ashes of the man he used to be.

And he’s come to see it’s no way he wants to live.

“Stark,” he addresses softly, pulling his stool closer to Tony’s chair. He doesn’t say anything else. He unstraps the restraints against Tony’s injured arm and nestled the IV further into his vein, and then he gently runs a soothing hand over the tense arm in hopes to soothe the man. “I thought when it came time for me to follow through with this... I would feel delighted, proud to know that *I* was the one to bring down the mighty Tony Stark. In fact, I’ve dreamed of this very moment. But now... for some reason I’m... I’m conflicted.” Richard purses his lips and squints his eyes as they begin to burn. “It’s odd.” He pauses as his hand runs over Tony’s forearm, lingering over the scar of a healed cut, as he gently brushes against it with the pad of his thumb. “And I truly do believe that in a different world, where we are not both men driven by ego and obsession, but simply by passion for the advancement of science, we’d be good friends.”

He could feel Stark’s eyes on him.

“You were a good father to Peter... A good man, as much as I hate to admit it.”

“Richard,” he coughs violently, “what shit are you goin’ on about?”

Richard sighs. Then he reaches for the small syringe and slowly presses the needle tip into the line of the IV and presses down on the plunger. He watches as the sparkling liquid slowly trickles down the small tube and into Stark’s veins, leaving a glowing trail behind as it slowly travels through his arm, making its way slowly up his neck and down his chest.

Tony’s body instantly arches off the chair and releases a shattering scream as the flickering trail of orange trails up the bulging veins of his neck. It wasn’t until he’s back, lax in the chair once more that he’s able to force out a breathless question.

“What the hell was that?” He slurred.

Richard leans just a little bit closer, keeping his voice low. “It was the only thing I was able to smuggle past security. I couldn’t very well waltz in here with cyanide up my sleeve. I told them it was a formula to help amplify the results of the regenerative compound... Which in an ironic way, it is.”

Tony’s chest dramatically falls up and down as he forces breath to and from his lungs.

“I know you were well aware of Killian and I’s project Extremis. We came so close to a promising procedure to help heal people, but we had a few setbacks regarding the necessary genetic makeup of the patient.”

“You killed people. Burned ‘em from the inside out.” Tony huffed, immediately forcing air back into his lungs as another surge of flaming pain split through him.

“We couldn’t figure any other way to tie together all the working pieces. We were missing something; just one tiny piece... we could’ve had it. If we could’ve regenerated the cells quick enough, it would’ve tamed the mutations.” He trails off slowly, back to watching the dancing light show on Stark’s paled skin.

“That’s what you gave me, isn’t it?” Tony coughs, enduring yet again another surge.

“The half that kills people, yes? I was sure to separate any other healing factors just in case your Stark luck decided to rear it’s head and actually make it work. Soon you’ll be nothing more than a pile of ash in this chair.”

Tony growls, baring his teeth. “They’ll kill you for this.”

Richard only offers a small smile in return, standing from his stool and placing a hand over Stark’s bare chest. “I know Stark, but sacrifices have to be made every now and again.”

“Why risk it,” Stark’s barely able to get the word out as his throat heats up and his chest collapses atop his lungs. “After all this work.”

“It’s for the greater good,” Richard whispers. “Hydra needs you. For what reason, I don’t know... but they *need* you. Everything they’ve done and everything they’ve been planning is an effort to get to *you*. *You* are the key for their survival... And after all these years, in all the attempts to put an end to their reign of terror, now they’re survival all depends on one man’s life and they’re failing to protect him.”

Another painful wave has Tony arching off the chair once more, and Richard can already hear the chaos happening outside the door he’d used a wedge to keep in place.

“*Cut off one head... and two more will take its place.*” Richard whispers, a dark glint of determination glimmering in his eyes. “People have tried and failed to put an end to this, but now they finally have a weakness. They’re on their back, belly up, exposing that weakness to me as if I wouldn’t gladly take the opportunity.” He reaches up to grip Tony’s jaw, smiling down at him. “There are no heads in sight. No resurrection to restore power and save their legacy. This time... I’m cutting out its heart, and there’s no coming back from that.”

Just as the final words leave his mouth the door swings open and guards swarm the room along with a group of doctors. Richard is quickly dragged from the room, getting one last glance of Stark arching up in his chair with a final scream, yelling and chaos taking place around him in an effort to save the one man their entire future depended on.

And even after Richard is finally dragged from the room, past his furious brother in the hall, and past his designated room to a fate he knew would follow his actions... he has no regrets.

Chapter End Notes

Italian Translations:

Prenderò a calci in culo qualcuno = I'm gonna kick someone's ass

fica = pussy

Che cavolo = What the hell

(... but cavolo also means cabbage so that's why Clint was confused lol)

Yes I know I promised an earlier update... but I'm a jerk and y'all should know I'm bad at updating on time. But this time it was kinda for a good cause. A friend of mine convinced me to wait until I had finished a good portion of the NEXT chapter so y'all won't have to suffer as long because, well... this ending kinda sucks. So, that's my excuse this time.

Also, I don't know how many of you know the accuracy/or inaccuracy of a lot of that, but just know that I did an unhealthy amount of research for a lot of that shit (except for the eye thing Yuck! I did not want to see any pictures of that so I just used my imagination) and I'm pretty sure half of it is still wrong. So, just know I tried my best. I am not an expert in Torture, medicine, or psychology in any way shape or form.

Also... keep in mind that I'm trying to keep this as realistic to the real world as possible. So, the Extremis thing doesn't work exactly like it does in the movies. It only heals flesh wounds, not broken bones and complex nerve tissue and all that. It'll explain it a bit more in the next couple of chapters.

Anywho lovelies. I'd love to hear your thoughts!

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Slight Warning: Mentions of labor/childbirth, but it's not too graphic. Also, violence... but I think that's been pretty well established so far.

And also Disclaimer: Author has lost touch with reality... so there's that too.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harley eventually calms down. It didn't take long for his sense to sorta kick back into gear and grasp the fact that him freaking out was doing nothing more than putting unneeded stress on his pregnant mother. So, when his breathing had returned to normal and his tears had stopped, he felt Pepper tug gently on his sleeve to urge him to lie down on the bed. He bristled though, turning his head towards her with a heated protest passing his lips while he pushed against her hands to remain upright.

He wasn't stupid. He knew what she was trying to do, and he wasn't gonna have it.

"No! I'm fine! We have to get out of here and get Peter! You said you had a plan."

Pepper's eyebrows pulled together and her forehead wrinkled as a deep frown set on her lips. She gave him a stern look, one that kinda seemed like she was trying to communicate some underlying message behind her next few words. "I never said that, honey. If I had a plan don't you think I would've been out and looking for you boys by now?" She glances furtively off to the side and Harley has the fancy to take a look himself, but his mother's grabs onto his jaw before he could, forcing his face to keep still and look at her. She stares at him, eyes wide in an unspoken plea to follow her lead.

So he does.

"Yeah," he whispers, urging his eyes to somehow convey his understanding to her. Slowly, her grip loosens on his face and her fingers gently drift along his cheekbone and over the dried tear tracks before her hand falls away entirely with a tight smile. It isn't difficult to tell how hard she's trying to keep herself from crying in front of him.

"Okay, then," she states definitively with a small snuffle. She tilts her chin up and gently smooths down the lapels of his flannel. "I'll think of something, Honey. But for now, I think you should get some rest, okay? You've had a long day."

He lowers himself onto the cot slowly, Pepper following him down so she can lay beside him. He feels stiff as he lies there and there's this uncomfortable tingling along his skin screaming at him to get up and *do* something! He doesn't want to just lie around and wait for a savior to come along and liberate him and his family, because the likelihood of that happening is slim to none. For all he knows, the only man that is really capable of coming to their rescue is dead... and that thought alone just makes him feel so helpless and alone... *Tony could very well be dead, and so could Peter for all he knew*. But then he feels a soft hand in his hair and he feels the tension drain from his tight muscles similar to the way they did when he was tucked into his parents bed for the first time. It was a comfort and it offered a heavy blanket of security as he melted further into his

mother's hold, pressing closer so his face was protected by the curtain of her long hair. She continues to gently play with his dirty curls, fingers weaving through the several knots he'd accumulated over the past couple weeks. He can feel the vibrations of her soft hums against his cheek where he laid it against her chest; the familiar lullabye he'd heard her sing to Peter so many times helping him drift off to sleep with only a loose memory of his brother's screams as he was ripped from his arms and taken beyond the heavy metal door.

It wasn't the happiest memory to drift off to... but the hope that there might be a chance to get him back lifts the weight from his chest just enough so his breaths could even out into a soft slumber.

He was only allowed a few short moments of bliss before he was being awoken by a small pinch to his sensitive side.

"Mom?" He sits up abruptly from the bed, eyes searching the dark room, but he's pulled back down on the bed and a hand slowly fits over his mouth.

"Shhh," Pepper whispers softly, "go back to sleep, sweetheart."

Her head rests on top of his, mouth and nose hidden by his curls. Her hand slips away from his mouth and gently travels up to his forehead, lying her index finger right at his hairline.

Then he can feel the tap of her finger. No... *taps* .

Tap. Tap. Tap Pause. Tap Pause. Tap Pause. Tap Pause. Tap Pause. Tap. Tap Pause.

The pattern continues, and he *knows* it must mean something.

And after a couple times, the motion gets a bit more insistent and he searches his brain for whatever his mother must be trying to communicate-- *Communicate* ! Morse code!

He could just hit himself for not realizing it sooner. He's such an idiot.

She must feel his body tense in recognition or *something*, because she pauses, lifting her finger from his forehead before starting anew... beginning very softly and slowly so he has time to decipher.

And of course Harley knows Morse Code. He's a nerd... It's just been a while, and he's a bit rusty.

But after a couple tries he can clearly decrypt a simple question. *U OK?*

So, he nods, a small smile on his face as he feels the deep breath of relief released from his mother's mouth. And she continues her tapping, but this time it's a new pattern.

Harley picks it up quickly. He mistakes a couple letters here and there but given the context it's fairly easy to correct his mistakes. And the abbreviations threw him off every now and again, but after a couple rounds he got the hang of it.

Got Plan.

They C And Hear Us.

Quiet.

I B Sick.

They Come.

Try Get Phone.

Don't Worry.

And just as he gives his final nod of understanding to the last statement, Pepper bolts upright from the bed with a loud cry of distress as she clutches her stomach. And, god, if Harley hadn't been warned beforehand that would've freaked him the hell out. It *was* freaking him the hell out. He quickly moved out of her way as she struggled up from the bed, and he helped her fall to her knees on the floor as she released another loud groan of pain before lifting a hand and discreetly forcing herself to vomit all over the floor.

Harley has to turn his head away, wrinkling his nose in slight disgust at the foul smell, but he holds back her hair despite it.

It didn't take very long before the lights to their room were switched on and the door was thrown open with a loud bang to demand his attention. The first to enter was a woman with a white coat, immediately taking his post and asking Pepper what was wrong. And before Harley even had time to try and make a grab for that imaginary phone he's pretty sure would be kept in that left coat pocket, he's yanked backwards by a guard, a good three feet away from the doctor and his mother as the lady helps her back to the cot.

"Listen Dude," he starts gently, "I'll stay right here, alright? I won't move. I swear. Can you just please let go of me."

He must've lucked out on a nice soldier because the dude silently complied....

Ok, now what? How the hell is he supposed to get a phone?

He looks to see a few more people file in. Two nurses and two more guards. He doesn't know what the hell to do. Again... *how in the hell is he supposed to get a phone??*

And then, he's hit with a sudden idea... It's probably a stupid idea, but it's an idea nonetheless. So, he goes for it.

He faints. Or at least he pretends to faint. He tries his best to time it at the same moment Pepper vomits again.

Strong arms grab him before he hits the floor, just as he predicted he would be, and he's propped up against a large body. So he takes advantage of the noodle arms and searches earnestly for anything with the semblance of a phone. It's hard to be inconspicuous when you're also supposed to be passed out but he makes it work. He's done far harder in far less time during his time on the streets and with Oscorp. He just hopes he hasn't lost his touch. Eventually, finally, his hand grazes over what he was looking for and he can't help but grin.

Peter sits in the dark, hugging his knees tight to his chest as he stares at the large door opposite him. He glares at it through his stream of angry tears. He wipes at them viciously, then wipes his nose which only ends in smearing globs of snot across his cheeks.

He doesn't know how long he's been waiting... but he does know that it is nothing like when he had been with Harley. With Harley they got food and water and plenty of books to read, and of course, he had Harley who was there and ready to comfort him with a strong hug and kiss on the head at any moment he wished. Now, all he could think about was the constant rumbling of his hungry belly and the welfare of his older brother. He wished he was older too so that he would be able to actually do something to protect him, but he's just a little boy and he's nowhere near as

strong as Harley or Daddy...

He blinks, fresh tears streaming even quicker at the thought of the man... He meant Tony... because Tony wasn't his Dad no more and he wasn't Harley's Dad either.

And with that thought he's led to the horrifying realization that if Tony wasn't their Dad... then Harley wasn't his older brother either. That single severed connection with the older boy has him falling to the floor, curled on his side and cowering through his violent sobs as he mourns for the-- he doesn't know... the something-- of the boy who used to be his big brother.

And then he thinks of Pepper... Mama. Could Pepper still be his Mama even though Tony wasn't his Daddy? Was Pepper faking it just like Tony was this whole time? Was she still Harley's Mama too? That gets his hopes up, because if she is then that meant that he and Harley can still be brothers, and also he can be an older brother too! He loved Morgan so much and he promised a long time ago that he would protect her and love her just as much as Harley protects and loves him which is a *whole* lot.

And just as soon as his hopes were restored and his sobs had begun to die down, another dejected realization reared its ugly head... he'd never get to see Mama again if he couldn't get out of here. His mean father would take him somewhere far far away, he just knows it. And if he does then he would never get the chance to meet his baby sister and he would never be able to protect her. He'd still love her of course, with all the love his little boy heart could muster... but it would be really really hard to love someone he'd never met.

And what about Harley?? What if Harley is really really hurt. Would he never be able to see his big brother again? Would he die just like his old Mama did? There was blood... he saw Harley bleeding, and he looked hurt, and he wasn't moving... and that's exactly what he remembers happening to his first mama when his bad Daddy had killt her.

The door opens with a loud creak, because of course it opens the moment he had looked away.

"Parker!" It's been a while since he's heard that name referred to him... He *hates* it. He was supposed to be a Stark!

He lifts his head, tears accentuating the glistening anger in his eyes. He glares at the man. It was a guard, and he was happy to see it wasn't his father. He *hated* his father.

"You're Dad's made some shit decisions kid. They're taking him away. Ben says you're to go with him. C'mon."

Ben?

Did he mean his Uncle Ben? The brother of his evil father? The one who had brought him to the man in the first place. The man who took him away from his brother? He did *not* like that man. He had been so nice... and he *tricked* him! He wasn't about to be tricked again! He's not going anywhere Ben says to.

So Peter sat down harshly on his rump, crossing his arms over his chest defiantly as he readied himself to put up a fight.

"No."

The guard's eye twitched in irritation and Peter bared his teeth in an ugly scowl. Challenging him to argue with his decision, just as he used to see his Dadd--Tony... just as he used to see Tony do when someone disagreed with him.

“You don’t have a say in this, kid.” The guy enters the room, carelessly leaving the door wide open behind him and Peter’s glare quickly surrenders as his eyes widen in hopeful realization. Then he glanced back up at the man stalking towards him with a mean sneer, apparently taking his sudden change in expression as one of fear.

So, Peter takes advantage of the man’s obliviousness and he stands, making a move like he was going to veer right. The man’s arms outstretched that way as he bends down, leaving his entire armor-lacking middle vulnerable. So, Peter pushes forward, with full force as he butts his head right into the man’s gut. He grunts, clutching his stomach and Peter dashes from the room, struggling just a bit to close the heavy door behind him so he couldn’t be followed.

He runs and he runs, a fierce look of determination as he pumps his arms and legs as quick as they would go. He was going to save his brother, because it wasn’t like Tony was gonna do it.

As soon as the doctor and guards left, Harley rushed back to the bed his mother was on once more, clambering under the sheets beside her so their noses were only a few inches apart. She lifts a soft hand and gently strokes his cheek.

“ *Did you get it Mimmo ?*” She spoke in soft Italian, the tone portraying something more similar to a statement than a question. Harley reached under the blanket into his pocket, pulling out the outdated analogue phone he was able to snatch from one of the guards utility belts.

“Si Mamma.” He answers, gently pressing the device into the hand she had hidden beneath the blanket as well. She smiles proudly at him but her eyes are tired.

“ *Good job ,*” she whispered and Harley smiled at the soft praise. She closes her eyes like she was planning to fall back to sleep, reaching for Harley’s hand and beginning the tapping once more.

Got 1, 2.

She pressed a slimmer device towards Harley’s hand so he could feel the smooth glass of the smartphone she had been able to retrieve as well.

We get out.

Use this 4 SOS.

Harley grabbed her fingers to stop her from tapping then tapped out his own message, being sure to keep his eyes closed in order to keep whoever may have been watching them from gaining suspicion.

Got knife 2.

He feels his mother squeeze his hand in praise.

Good.

Proud of U.

Harley taps back.

Love U.

And Pepper pulls him closer to her, kissing his forehead gingerly.

“I love you, sweet boy. I knew it the minute I met you, that you would be special. Every wish upon a star I’ve had since that day, I’ve spent on you, wishing you could forget all the terrible things you’ve had to face and reclaim your right to be an unconcerned child,” he can hear the tears in her voice as she holds him tight to her and Harley has to squeeze his eyes closed at the soft words. Words of love he had for years believed he would never deserve again. “But tonight my only wish for you is a peaceful sleep, undisturbed by these worries you should’ve never faced, because my dear I would trade my life if it meant you never had to see these ugly things. But you’re so strong, for me and for your brother and I am so, *so* proud of you. You’re a wonder if I’ve ever met one, and you deserve the world. I hope one day I have the chance to give it to you. So, get some rest.” She presses a lingering kiss to his forehead and he can feel exactly two tears drop onto his skin before she pulls away. “Let the stars light the way to your dreams.”

Talk morning.

And, so, with the security of his mother’s arms around him, and the continuing whispers of reassurance echoing behind his doubt, promising that soon everything would be alright and they could all be together again, he feels himself begin to drift. Her whispers of encouragement and love carry on until she hears his breath had finally evened out and he had drifted to sleep in the warmth of her embrace.

Tony could feel a small twinge in his left shoulder, and the closer he came to consciousness the sharper the twinge became. It drew a heated hiss from his mouth as he forced breath back into his lungs. Slowly, his feeling returns, starting from the tips of his tingling fingers to the bare tips of his toes brushing against a cold surface. And as those the dull throb of those feelings slowly return, the pain in his left wrist is instantaneous as if the pain had been inflicted at that very moment. It was wedged tightly against the bone of the other by a rope, putting the strain of his entire body upon those two joints, and the tension on his arms leaves him feeling hot and heavy. Sweat dripping from his feverish face as a cold chill eats at the rest of his body and the flames heating his arms ignite.

His teeth grit together as he swallows down the heavy groan and the howls of pain suddenly surging his system all at once. He’s dangling just above the floor, his entire weight forced upon his mangled and healthy wrist tied together above his head, and he’s honest to god surprised they hadn’t snapped under the pressure.

So, he digs his toes into the ground, arching his feet and stretching through his back as he releases a tight growl of pain in his effort to relieve some of the weight.

Then there’s a quick push aimed at his calves and his legs are left flailing as his body immediately swings outwards, then back like an old pendulum. He shouts, before biting down on his tongue, as the ropes dig into the mangled bone in his hands and he scrambles to get his feet back underneath him.

“You’re hanging for a reason Stark,” A gruff voice calls out from behind him. “Don’t make it more difficult for yourself.”

Tony forces his eyes open... or, well... his one eye open. He winces slightly, ‘cause, yeah, he can still feel that... it leaves him disoriented and dizzy as he tries to focus his gaze.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” He heaves as he tries to catch his breath.

Then he sees the man walk into his view. His face was obstructed by a large cloth handkerchief across his nose and mouth, along with a matching hat. All that could be seen were the piercing blue

eyes and the crinkling skin beside them in a telltale sign that the man was surely grinning beneath the mask.

“It’s not every day you get the chance to see a man be resurrected... I mean the doctors said you’d eventually wake up again... but I wasn’t about to believe it until I saw it happen myself. So... welcome back to the land of the living, Stark.”

Tony frowned at him, searching his memory for any clue as to what the hell this shithead was saying.

And then he remembered...

“Where’s Richard?”

The man shrugged and the smile wrinkles around his eyes disappeared and his eyebrows knit closer together.

“What do you think Stark?” He scoffed. “He disobeyed direct orders.”

Tony’s thoughts drifted back to Peter... of Richard’s plan to take Peter with him when he left. If they kill Richard... then where would Peter end up, if it wasn’t with him? If he wasn’t ever able to get out of this place... because he’s sure as hell that if he does ever get out he’d keep searching for his boys till the day he died. All he knows right now is he’d much rather Peter flee the country with Richard than be left with Hydra after all the information he’s had to give them. As much as he despised the man... anything would be better for Peter than Hydra.

He pushes away those thoughts. It was best not to give these bastards any ideas on what to hold over his head. They’d already used Peter against him once and he didn’t want to have to go through that again.

“I’m not dead though.”

“Yeah, but he still tried to kill you.”

The man still remained impassive, and for the life of him Tony couldn’t get a proper read on him. Nothing.

“He said Hydra needed me. That you depend on me for your survival.”

Finally, an expression. He rolls his eyes with a tight scoff. “Those are the Boss’ words. Not mine. He’s obsessed with you, Stark. Like, an unhealthy amount in my opinion. But I can’t blame him I suppose. He did spend your entire life molding you into a man capable of the potential you hold and it’d be a shame to see all that hard work go to waste. But he’s the boss man, so I just do as I’m told and collect my dues. That’s it.”

And boy, didn’t that just raise a million more questions he wanted to ask. Sadly, he knew he didn’t have time for that. It was only a matter of time before the man’s patience was worn thin and he was no longer willing to share. Tony slowly glances over his body, and sure enough, everything was in its place. Not even a single burn mark as he’d been expecting.

“I shouldn’t have survived that.”

The man chuckles.

“Oh, I know. We all know.” He nods his head distractedly and turns towards the door as if he

expected someone to step through it at any moment. “We lost you for about 5 minutes.”

Tony frowned

“That’s not possible.”

The man gives him an appraising look that Tony knows all too well. “Again... I know.”

“Well then How--”

He’s cut off sharply by the other man’s speech.

“Just stop talking alright? I’m not supposed to be in here and I only got a little time. I can’t answer all your fancy science-y questions. All I know is Richard tried killing you and somehow your body died, then burst into flames and now you’re alive again. It doesn’t make sense and I don’t really wanna be able to make sense of it. So, just wait till the doctor gets in here and you can pester them with all those stupid questions.”

Again... so much to take away from that.

“Why are you even here then?”

And boy the sudden shift in demeanor was downright startling.

“Like I said before... I wanted to see this miracle for myself. Plus I wanted to meet you. Is that such a sin?” His voice was soft and smooth as he glided over the words without a blunder. It was a startling contrast from Richard’s inexperience and showmanship. “It’s one hell of a brag to say I’ve seen Tony Stark on the verge of death, begging for mercy.”

The idea in itself was so absurd Tony couldn’t help the high-pitched giggle that escaped from his mouth. The same giggle that Rhodey absolutely *hated* . The one that involuntarily escapes him at the more inopportune times and almost always leads to an aggravated huff from his best friend as he whirls around on him with a glare and a growl of “ *now what?* ”.

“Sorry to burst your bubble pal,” he coughed, choking slightly on a bit of blood that spills from his mouth. He’s so used to it by now it doesn’t even bother him. “But I’m not typically one to beg for my life. I like to go down swingin’.”

He must have not been on guard because just as the words escape his mouth a hard, blunt force slams into his ribs, sending him swinging to the right with a loud holler.

“I never said it’d be *your* life that you’d be begging for, now did I Stark?”

The man got right in his face, an evil yet purely joyful twinkle in his eyes. Tony had the perfect opportunity to kick him, just raise his leg and knee him right in the dick, but then the implication behind those words kept him frozen in place.

He can feel his throat spasm, but he forces himself to swallow around the uncomfortable knot.

“Care to elaborate?” He forces out with a hoarse breath, spoken through gritted teeth.

The man smiles so wide he can practically see the outline of his outstretched lips through the thin fabric of his mask.

“I’d be happy to.”

The next morning Harley wakes up to the sound of a pained cry, sending his body into autopilot as he springs up in a panic, fully awake.

“Mom?!” He gasps when he sees her hunched over the sink by the toilet. One hand braced against the stained porcelain and the other pressed firmly against the underside of her belly. Her face is strained red as she grits her teeth in an effort to muffle her pained curses and her entire face glistens with sweat.

“Ohmygod Ohmygodohmygod!” Harley vaults from the bed, movements stuttering in panic as he tries to untangle himself from the blanket in a hurry as he realizes what was happening. “You-you’re not-- you’re not due for another two weeks! What do we do?? We-we... Mom!” He dives towards her and leads her back to the cot so she could properly sit down. He breathes out through his mouth and breathes back in through his nose sharply to try and calm down. This wasn’t the end of the world... it was simply just an inconvenience.

Time blurs, but all he knows is he’s able to get Pepper to the bed just in time before their door is swinging open and a wheelchair is wheeled into the room followed by several nurses and who he thinks might also be the doctor from last night. And of course, there’s a guard off to the side to make sure there’s no funny business. And Harley can’t help but scoff at the absurdity. What kind of shit was a pregnant woman going to pull in the middle of LABOR?!”

... his query was quickly answered.

As soon as the doctor grabs for her wrists to pull her towards the chair, Pepper instantly sobers up. Her cries quiet and any guise of pain is gone from her expression, like she hadn’t been disturbed to begin with as she abruptly pulls the poor woman forward by the wrist then reaches up to place her other hand behind her slim neck and then she brings her head down hard against the bedpost and lets her body drop to the ground in an unconscious heap, all in the matter of a second or two.

She stands just as the guard begins reaching for his gun and out of nowhere Pepper’s arm extends in one swift motion and an almost indiscernible streak cuts through the air in a long arch, which ends in a shiny object impaling the man’s exposed hand against the wall behind him. Harley doesn’t even have time to blink, staring in astonishment at the slender knife protruding from the man’s hand as he cries out in pain and Pepper handles the rest of the nurses with *another* knife to match.

Where the hell did she get those from?

Harley can’t help but watch in fascination. It was nothing like watching Tony fight. Or Happy. Or, heck, even Natasha. Sure each of them have their own style and grace, but it’s rugged and planned, and completely practiced in a sense that motions are almost repetitive and mundane. But Pepper... It was like an art. A dance. There was a certain elegance to it as she spun on the heels of her feet, and no hesitation in where she landed her mark against the chest of a nurse before calmly plucking the blade from the bloody cavity without any stumble in her fluid movements before ducking under an incoming arm and gracefully catching its extended hand, twisting the wrist to disarm them of the the long syringe and spinning them around before kicking out there feet from under them and falling to the ground with them to force the blade down between their eyes just as she caught the dropped needle in her other hand. She’s awkwardly squatted on the ground just as she turns, with an obvious struggle in the uncomfortable position she’s in with her extended belly, but it doesn’t take away from her aim as she sends the needle sailing with a small flick of her wrist as it pierces the previous guard’s throat just as he begins pulling the knife from the palm of his hand.

And just like that... there are two more... Each of which are taken care of in, well... Harley doesn’t know. He just blinks his eyes and they're down. And he is **FUCKING DUMBFOUNDED** .

“Mom?!” He squeaks, voice rising significantly in pitch.

“Honey,” she reaches her hand out to him, and she has that soft mom face back as she urges him towards her with a small wiggle of her fingers. “Come on, we have to go now.”

He can’t close his mouth. He just--- he’s...

“Ohmygod my mom’s a badass”

Of course he *knew* that. Hell, he’s known about the badass that was Pepper Potts before she was ever associated with the Stark name. But he supposes his mind has sorta forgotten about all those wayward tales after one too many times being scolded for not brushing his teeth before bed. The awe of her badassery sorta wore off when she became his mom. But NOW she was Mom *and* a badass?

Dope.

Pepper smiles sweetly at him, a warmth and new sense of hopefulness in her eyes as she pulls him along beside her, one hand still braced protectively over her belly. “Don’t tell your father about this.”

As they pass the groaning and moaning guard man still pinned to the wall, Pepper reaches over to push down the plunger of the still half full syringe and the man immediately slumps just in time with the sharp Shhhhk sound of her dislodging the blade in his palm.

“Let’s hope there aren’t many more waiting for us outside.” She muses quietly.

Harley cracks open the door and peaks out into the echoing silence of the hallway. He’s happy to see there’s no army of soldiers rushing to detain them and he turns back into the room to deliver the good news only to find his mother bracing herself, once again, against the doorframe and forcing tight breaths in and out of her lungs.

“You’re actually in labor?!” Harley immediately lets go of the door and reaches for her in some frantic need to help. “I thought you were faking it like last night when you started kicking their asses!”

“Well,” Pepper exhales shallowly through gritted teeth. “It was a prime opportunity and I wasn’t about to give it up.”

And it was a testament to how out of it she was when she didn’t immediately scold him on his choice of words.

“Okay okay okay... cool-cool-cool-cool-coool.... ummm. “ He glances around the room in search of something that might help and his eyes light up with an idea. “Why don’t you sit down for a bit?” He rushes towards the wheelchair, pushing limp bodies out of the way of the chair’s path with the toe of his foot.

“We don’t have time for that Harley,” Pepper sighs through a quiet whimper. “We need to get out of here and find your brother before--AGH!” She grits her teeth and closes her eyes as her hand fists around the fabric of her dress on the underside of her belly.

Harley parks the chair just behind her then scampers around to help ease her back slowly.

“It’s okay. I’ll push. You’d probably slow us down anyways. This’ll be a lot quicker... and safer” He holds her hand gently, allowing her to squeeze his fingers as she rides through the pain of the

contraction. “You’ll be fine.” He assures her gently. “We’ll um... we’ll find Peter and I’ll find a way to get us out of here....” A sour taste hits his tongue as he looks between her and the door, only just realizing that there was no way they could do both. There was no way in hell he and Pepper can fight their way through this fortress to find Peter *and* all get out safely. Not when she’s in this condition. There was no way in hell. In fact there was no way in hell he’d be risking his mother and soon-to-arrive baby sister to go on some suicide mission to find Peter. No, he needs to get Pepper and Morgan out first... and then he’ll come back for Peter.

Her grip on his hand eases up slightly and he jumps back into action, scurrying towards the guard and shoving his limp body onto its side so he can scavenge for any weapons on his belt that might be of use. He finds the gun and he only stares at it for a moment before quickly tucking it into his waistband and hiding it with the overhang of his flannel so his mother can’t see. And he only allows a couple more seconds of rummaging, finding a few clips for the gun along with a stun gun and a radio which he thinks will probably come in handy later... that’s what people usually take in the movies right? Then when someone radios in he can fake a voice and pretend the guy is still alive so no one gets suspicious and so he can hear all the secrets that just might help lead them out of here... or maybe he’ll run that one by Pepper first because it’s usually a 50/50 for how that particular strategy turns out.

Either way, he rushes back to his mother, gently pushing her back down into the seat when she tries standing again. Her face isn’t scrunched up in pain anymore so he assumes that means the contraction must have passed already.

“I’ll push you. That way we can get around easier, yeah?”

He thinks Pepper might glare at him as she settles back into the seat, but she doesn’t protest anymore as he reopens the door. It takes a few tries and a couple awkward angles before he’s able to wedge the wheelchair through the heavy door, but he does it. And then they’re out in the very grey hallway. The lights are way too bright and everything is just screaming super secret bad guy base. He’s seen Star Wars, he knows what a super secret bad guy base looked like. He looks to the left and then the right. They both look the same.

“Go right.” Pepper says, pointing in that direction. “Left will take us further into the base and we need to get out of the open and we can make a plan. And we need to get close to the control room for a stronger signal so I can send that SOS. There’s usually one along each end.”

Harley raises a brow in confusion but does as she says.

“Have you been here before or something?”

He stares at the back of his mother’s head as it slowly shakes back and forth in amusement and her shoulders shake with a small chuckle. “No, I haven’t.”

“Well how’d you know?” Harley presses, picking up his pace with his eyes set at the end of the hallway, glancing back every now and again to make sure there are no guards behind them. “And also!” He perks up. “Where did those knives come from? You literally whipped them out of nowhere!”

He can almost picture Pepper smiling. “Well to your first question,” she whispers softly, “every time someone would come into the room, they’d be filing in from towards the left and that’s the way they’d go when they leave, which means that’s probably where the activity typically happens. Maybe, a guards station or where the medical staff work.”

“And the knives?”

“They were in my bra.” She states simply. “They take the place of the wiring. Your father actually made them for me.” She holds up one of the knives, tracing the slight curve to the thin blade for him to see. “Nobody ever thinks to check a pregnant woman's bra.”

Harley scrunches his nose and pokes out his tongue. “Dad makes your bras?”

“Not all of them. Just most of them. He likes the build to be a certain way.” A teasing lilt melds with her tone when she says the last part and Harley scoffs in disgust.

“Eew! Mom! Stop it!”

She laughs and Harley can't help but laugh at the absurdity of it either. It felt nice to laugh again.

And just like that they were at the end of the hall and they had another choice to make. Left or Right.

Pepper contemplates the choice, hand resting on her stomach as she leans forward, pursing her lips. She could see guards a ways down to the right, but they didn't seem to be paying all that great of attention. That's when another contraction hit and Harley may not know much about labor, but he does know that they shouldn't be that quick between one another in just the beginning. He'd been around when Elena had been talking to Pepper about the birth.

“It's only been, like, four minutes,” he whispers, reaching over her shoulder to grasp her hand gently. “Does that mean you're getting close?”

She squeezes his hand in response, but doesn't answer as she breathes through the contraction.

“How long have you been in labor? Does this mean you have to start pushing soon? Should we try and find a doctor or something? Mom? Mom?!”

“Harley!” She snaps rigidly, holding up her hand. “Give me a moment.”

“Oh... sorry.” He hesitates, pushing from foot to foot nervously. He couldn't very well go either direction with those guards, and he wasn't very keen on staying in one place, but what could he do? So he rounds to the front of the chair and squats beside her to squeeze her hand. “Ummm Just breathe, I guess. Those breaths that Elena would practice with you, remember? What was it, umm, slowww. Innn and out.” He tries breathing with her, exaggerating his breaths, but god this was kinda freaking him out and he was feeling a bit lightheaded with the overabundance of oxygen and now was *no time* to be passing out.

And of course, at the worst possible time, he hears a sharp shout of “hey” from down the hall. Two helmeted guards had just come into the hall from behind them and Harley whirled around in a panic. He doesn't know if it was instinct, or adrenaline as he pulled the small pistol from his waistband and released about four rounds before each of them were on the ground.

“Harley!” Pepper shouted trying to turn and look, but Harley squeezed her shoulder as he pulled her wheelchair out of the line of fire before pressing against the wall and peaking around the corner when he heard the commotion he knew was going to begin as soon as he made those shots. There was no way the guards all around this empty, echo-y tundra couldn't have heard that.

“Just breathe Mom, I got this.” He doesn't know where all this determination was stemming from, but he kinda felt like an action hero right now as he peeked around the corner to count the number of guards headed their way. He can count five-- no six. He pulls away from around the corner and presses his back to the wall, clutching the small pistol in his trembling hand.

He's got this... he's totally got this...

It's been a while, but he's one hell of a shot. *He thinks* .

"Is that a gun?! Harley!" His mother's voice snaps him out of his little internalized pep talk. He peeks around the corner again, this time with his arm extended and fires off three shots, before the bullets start whizzing back at him and bouncing off the metal of the corner corridor he's hidden behind once more. He breathes deep... he doesn't think he even hit *one* of them. They were too far away. He's never shot at something that far away with so little time to aim.

The echoing sound of bullets ricocheting against the metal pillars lining the hallways doesn't stop and he winces, forcing his eyes closed as he takes in a couple deep breaths to psych himself up a bit.

"Harley?"

He looks up to his mother. She has her hand out, confidence glinting in her eyes. "You got this, Harley. You got this." She smiles proudly. And he huffs out an uncertain chuckle, but the words still help.

The firing peters off slowly and Harley uses that opportunity to twirl back around the corner and face off against them once more, only this time they are a lot closer. Which is good, but also bad. Good, because now he can aim, but bad because now these guys had a better aim also. And, well, he's totally going to be a little shit about this to Tony because if the man had just caved and actually let him practice on using the guns, maybe he'd be a bit of a better shot, but *nooooo* . He had to try and do the right thing and now it took Harley like 10 shots to take out all six, and now he had a graze on the side of his thigh.

Nothing too bad... but it stung like hell, and there was no way he would be telling his mother because this tiny injury was not what she should be focused on right now.

As soon as he watches the last one fall he rushes out from behind the corner, runs down the hall and practically slides across the floor on his knees as he approaches the first body. He hurries between each corpse, doing his best to ignore all the blood, that would probably traumatize him if he hadn't been thoroughly traumatized throughout his life already. He checks their pockets and belts for any weapons that may be better than the pistol he already has, but he finds none. So he discards the empty casing and uses a new one to replace it before collecting all the clips he could carry and rushing back to his mother.

She looked like she was having a contraction again.

"Mom?" He grabs her hands, and he'll be honest he's getting a bit nervous about this whole labor thing. It's not that he wasn't before, but now he *really* is. There's no way she's only been in labor since that morning. He doesn't let go of her hand or ask any more questions until it's over. "Mom, please be honest with me about this. When did you go into labor?"

"Last night." She sighs slowly. "I was waiting until morning to try and conserve some energy through the night." She closes her eyes and winces slightly as she holds her stomach.

Harley exhales sharply. *That wasn't good* . He knew that much.

"Ok, that's not good, right?" He hesitates, grabbing her hand and glancing up and down the hall in a frantic attempt to find a solution.

"Well, it's not great."

“What do I do?” He’s feeling the panic begin to set in. His mother was in labor... she was about to have a baby, and he had no idea what to do. “Mom, what do I do?”

Pepper breathes in tight through her nose then pushes out the breath through her mouth before leaning forward to take account of their surroundings. Then she leans back and closes her eyes as she continues her harsh breathing exercises.

“You need to find a room. Maybe a--” she takes another deep breath, “Maybe a supply room, a bathroom maybe... something where there won’t be cameras.”

Harley’s back straightens in an instant and his eyes widen. “Where the hell am I supposed to find that?!” He exclaims, scrambling behind the chair and pushing off at a frantic pace. “It’s not like there’s a map to guide us through this goddamn maze.”

He can hear his mother growl under her breath, but he can’t be sure if that’s as a result of his choice of words or by the worsening contractions. And every door they pass along the hall, Harley checks each one with a panicked tug. None of them open. It isn’t until his mother hits the second contraction in three minutes that he can feel his limbs go shaky and weak.

“Mom,” he whines in a panic as he frantically tugs on the handle of the last door in the hall, “it’s not-- I can’t find--”

“Harley!”

His head snaps up to see his mother pointing further down the hall towards a discreet door tucked into the corner. And, well, if that didn’t look promising! He leapt into action and tried the door, crying out in relief when the door gave way to a single bathroom.

He doesn’t know where he got the strength and determination to do it, but it didn’t take more than a few minutes before he had pushed his mother into the cramped room and locked the door with the bolt lock. He helped her out of the chair and gently lowered her to the floor so her back was braced against the wall near the sink.

“Ok-ok,” he muttered to himself as he ran both his hands through his hair. “What do I do--what do I do--what do I do?”

Pepper must have heard him because she reaches out for his hand and holds on tight. Her face was flushed and sweaty and, god, now that he was face to face with her, it only felt worse. He could see first hand the pain, strain and exhaustion.

“Honey...” she whispers softly, “just calm down. There’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about?!” Harley exclaims, jerking away from her hold and gesturing wildly to her incapacitated form on the floor. “You’re in labor and we’re in the middle of a fucking Hydra facility!”

“Hey!” She shouts, glaring at him. “What did I *just* say?!” She grits her teeth and pushes yet another strained breath from her lips. “You need to keep your head on, alright? Or this is never going to work.”

Harley’s startled into silence for a second as he stares down at his mother in shock.

“Mama I can’t do this.... Maybe-maybe we should let those doctors do this and then we can figure out a way to get out... what if something goes wrong and-and Morgan’s sick or something?” He

kneels back down to his mother's side and this time he's the one that grabs for her hand. In an attempt to both be given comfort and to give it.

Pepper's other hand lays over his gently.

"That's not an option sweetheart... They want Morgan... They want to keep her."

Harley stares at her. "What for?"

"She's a Stark. They want her because of your father I assume." Just as she finished speaking she cries out for just a moment as another contraction hits, then she bites down on her lip to try and keep quiet. "Ok," she huffs. "I think we've run out of time. We need to--" she's cut off when a pained whimper escapes her throat and she squeezes Harley's hand harder.

Harley forces himself to remain calm. His mother shouldn't be the one that needs to keep her head on... not right now. He needed to step up and take care of her. So, he rests his free hand on her shoulder and let's her squeeze his hand. "It's okay Ma. Just breathe. It's gonna be okay, I promise." He helps her through the contraction, which he thinks just might be the worst one yet. Hell, she's crying... so it must be bad.

It feels like it took ages before she's able to speak again, but he doubts it lasted as long as he thought. And as soon as she catches her breath she launches into a list of instructions.

"Ok, Harley, I would never ask you to do something like this unless it was completely necessary, but it's necessary. Take off your flannel, okay? Then go wash your hands and clean your knife as quick as you can. Leave the water on to let it get warm then get back down here. You don't have to look right now, but I need you to at least take a picture with the phone so I can see, okay? But you'll need to look eventually so try and prepare yourself for that, okay?"

And Harley does each of those things exactly as she says and it isn't until his mother is finished looking at the picture he had snapped of her... nether regions, that he fully realizes just what was about to go down. His mother starts speaking again, her breath once again stilted and strained as she does her best to remain coherent to calmly explain what was about to happen.

"In a few minutes Honey, I'm going to have to start pushing, okay? And you need to stay calm and get ready to help me make sure Morgan arrives as safely as possible. Do you think you can do that for me?"

Harley nods, swallowing around a tight lump in his throat as he glances down at the tent of his mother's dress created by her knees. His movements are jerks, and he's not so confident about the promise he just made to his mother... but he's got to try.

She takes a moment to catch her breath again, leaning her head back against the cold wall and closing her eyes as she rides through the intense cramping in her stomach.

"And don't worry, I'll try to walk you through everything. I had time to do plenty of reading during your father's paranoia streak." She chuckles at her own joke, trying to get Harley to lighten up, but he doesn't think there's anything she can say to bring the color back to his face. "First you just need to keep in mind that this is completely normal and natural. It's going to look scary and maybe a little gross, but I know you can handle it. First you're going to see the top of Morgan's head, that's called crowning, okay?" Harley nods frantically, eyes still bulging from his head "When you see that, you need to tell me, and you need to support her head and neck as she comes out so she doesn't get hurt. She'll be really once she's out so be careful, and once she's out you wrap her in your flannel and give her to me, okay?"

Harley gulps and he swears he might cry for a second here. He's about to help deliver his little sister... *oh god* .

"You'll do fine, Honey," Pepper reassures him, eyes closing once more as she squeezes his hand. "I may not be able to tell you what to do, while I'm pushing. Are you ready?"

No .

"Yeah," he chokes out, then moves to get into position. He prays that he won't faint as he slowly pinches the hem of his mother's dress.

He's really impressed with his ability to keep a straight face, because, well, the image he was seeing at that moment would probably be seared into his memory for a very *very* long time. He gulps, in hopes it would bring some moisture to his very dry throat before he speaks. "Um... yeah... she's crowning." He covers his mouth with his hand and closes his eyes for a second to keep the gag contained and he breathes deeply through his mouth.

Pepper starts breathing hard and she cries out slightly as she bends at the waist while she pushes and it forces Harley to get his head on straight so he could make sure he supported Morgan's emerging head. Then Pepper collapsed back against the wall as her chest heaved up and down with her heavy breaths.

"You're doing so good, sweetie," she affirms as she catches her breath. "Is-has she come out any more."

Harley glances back down again and nods. "Y-yeah, her-her head's about halfway." He swallows back yet another gag and looks up at his mother's face. There were tear tracks trailing down her cheeks and her hair was matted down to her sweaty forehead, and now for some reason his own predicament of helping his mother give life to his baby sister didn't seem so bad compared to the work and pain she was putting into it. She definitely had the worse end of this deal. So, he grabs her hand with his free one and squeezes it before giving her a reassuring smile. "You're doing amazing Mama. Soon she's going to be here and it'll all be over. Just try pushing again."

She cries a little bit, and her eyes scrunch up in a resentment for the coming pain, but she does so anyway and cries out once again as she keeps pushing. "I am going to castrate Tony Stark when we get out of here, I swear it!"

And soon enough, with a few more rounds of pushing, Morgan slips out into Harley's hands and he's mesmerized by the tiny baby cradled in his hands. She was messy and shiny, and pink all over. And, god, did she have a mouth on her. It was wide open and gummy, and she was sure not shy to let everyone know just how unpleasant she found it to be to enter into the world. The umbilical cord was still attached as he wrapped her as best he could in his plaid shirt.

He wanted to hold her for forever, but he knows his mother deserved that opportunity far more than he did, so he slowly offered her the wailing infant.

"Ohh, my baby," she cried softly, taking Morgan into her arms and holding her close. She pressed her index finger gently to her chin, then stroked her tiny cheek. She looked up at Harley, who was sporting such a big grin as he looked down at his sister with a teeming amount of adoration in his eyes. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yeah," he whispered, scooting closer so his chin could rest on his mother's shoulder. He reached forward to curl a gentle finger in one of her tiny brown curls. "Look, she's got Dad's hair."

Pepper's finger trails up to join his and she giggles under her breath. "She sure does." Then she taps her tiny button nose with the tip of her finger. "And she has his nose too." A serene silence follows as they both stare down at the now snuffling infant. For a moment they can forget that they are currently sitting in a bathroom, in the middle of a Hydra facility. "I wonder..." Pepper breaks the silence, slowly gracing a finger over one of the baby girl's eyebrows, "...if she'll have brown eyes like your brother and father, or blue... like you and I." She tilts her head to rest her head against Harley's.

"I don't know," Harley whispers softly. "Either way, she's going to be beautiful."

"I agree." Then, Pepper shifts a bit, and pulls Morgan away from her chest. Then, slowly unwraps the front of the flannel to expose her pink tummy to show the cord that was still attached. She turns to Harley. "Grab your knife Honey."

Harley does as she says and returns to find his mother pinching down on two points of the cord.

"Cut between my fingers." So he did.

And after that, his mom carefully rips a piece of her dress sleeve and instructs him on how to carefully wash her off using the warm water he'd been letting run in the sink, and the cloth as a rag. Morgan, of course, cries as if it is the absolute worst form of torture and Harley can't really blame her. He wouldn't really enjoy a lukewarm bath from a bathroom sink either. But, he speaks gentle words to her and assures her that soon enough she'll be all wrapped up and cozy in her Mama's arms again.

It wasn't until he was placing her back into Pepper's arms that he heard a slight crackling come from the radio he forgot he took.

He freezes, and so does Pepper as they both listen intently. It was hard to hear over Morgan's sharp cries... but there was no mistaking the words that filtered through the walkie.

"The Parker child has escaped and is currently on the move. I repeat, the Parker child is on the move. If you see him, lethal force is authorized."

"Peter!" Pepper gasps and immediately tries standing up with Morgan wailing in her arms. Harley pushes her back down.

"Mom! Are you crazy? You just gave birth to an entire baby! There's no way I'm letting you out of here. You need to rest!"

Morgan cries even louder.

"Harley!" She snaps sternly. "I am not going to rest while my son is in danger! I don't care if I gave birth to an entire sentry of babies; the only thing that can keep me from protecting my son is death, and even then I'll put up a damn fight!"

Harley's not deterred by her stern words or demeanor. He just helped deliver a whole ass *baby* ! If he can do that he can most definitely stand up to his mother.

"You can't even stand. The only thing you'll be doing is putting yourself and Morgan into danger by going after Peter right now." He couldn't lose her too. He failed to protect his first mother and baby sister; he's not going to make the same mistake twice. Not when he finally has his second chance.

He can see the moment his mother realizes how helpless she actually was in this situation. His

guess is she isn't used to being unable to fix something. The exhaustion and desperation is present on her face is enough to tell him that much. "Harley he's in trouble..."

And Harley doesn't know what to do... For the umpteenth time he wished Tony was here to tell him what to do. More than anything he wanted to go protect Peter, but he needed to protect his mother and infant sister. He couldn't be both places at once and there was no way in hell he'd be dragging them both into danger.

"I know Mama," he whispers quietly, gripping her hand, "but I cannot risk something happening to you and Morgan... we're so close. Let's just call Rhodey with the phone and he'll get here to come save Peter!" He scrambles to pull out the phone he stole and turned it on.

No service.

Of course!

He growls and tosses the phone aside.

"That was to send an encoded message to JARVIS. There won't be any service in this place without getting near the control room... and even then they'd never get here in time--"

"Fine! I'll get you and Morgan out so you can call for help and then I'll come back to find Peter and Dad and hope for backup."

"No, you're going to get out of here now. You're going to take Morgan, get out of here, and call for help. And *I* will go get Peter."

"*No*."

"Harley, I am *not* going to leave your brother behind, and that is final!"

"And I'm not going to leave *you* behind! I can't let anything happen to you! Do you not understand that? I'm not going to lose you too! I just got a Mom again... " he can feel the angry tears give way. "And I can't fail... not again. I-I...I promised Dad I'd make sure you were safe when he wasn't around."

"Harley," she reaches up to cup his cheek, "it's my job to protect my children, and I will do whatever it takes to keep them safe and happy."

Harley hesitates... he realizes there's no way he can win this fight with the outcome he wants. And as much as he'd love to use logic and play the greater good card, he knows he'd never forgive himself if Peter ever, *ever* ended up getting hurt. It's his little brother. And he promised that he'd protect Peter too... maybe there was a chance he could do both. Maybe he didn't actually have to *choose* this time.

"Alright... here's the deal." His voice is stern and authoritative. "You're going to stay here with Morgan; keep her quiet and keep the door locked." He places his gun beside her hip, and then the walkie-talkie and a few spare clips right next to it. "I'll pick up another gun and walkie outside. Go to channel 4 so we can have a private line and if *anything* happens you tell me and I'll come right back. I'll go get Peter and see if I can find Dad."

"No, that's too--"

Harley interrupts her quickly. "If you want any chance of Peter getting out of here, you'll trust me. Mom, right now you're not... you're not at your best. You need to rest and let your body heal,

okay? Peter needs someone ready and able to fight for him. I'll be fine. I promise."

He can see the conflict in her eyes, and he doesn't blame her. He's been in a situation like this before and it didn't end well. But this time he had confidence it wouldn't end in complete disaster

"I'll bring him back, I promise," he squeezes his mother's hand one last time then raises his other hand to cup the back of Morgan's head. He bends down and presses a quick kiss to her forehead. "Be good baby girl. I'm gonna go find Petey and your Daddy. They'll be so excited to meet you."

"Be safe," Pepper tells him, squeezing his hand tight.

"Ditto."

"Where the FUCK is she?!" Tony swings forward with the force of his words, an instinctual effort to charge the man subject to his frustrations. The man simply takes a step away, just out of reach of him, his eyes crinkling at the corners to show off the smirk he was surely wearing beneath the mask.

"What?" The man chuckles, "you mean Pepper?"

Tony could feel his blood boil... and not in the figurative sense. The heat from his skin actually *hurt*. The bastard knew damn well he was talking about his wife. Just seconds ago he'd sneered at him as he broke the news that his two sons weren't the only one to fall victim to Hydra's attack on the Tower.

"Don't worry too much Stark. She's being well taken care of," he pauses then shrugs his shoulders, "for now at least."

Tony felt an odd tingle rush through his fingers to induce a series of severe uncomfortable twitches. "If you know what's good for you, you better damn well tell me where my wife is."

The man dared to chuckle. "Oh yeah? And what can you do about it if I tell you? Even if she was in trouble... what. Can. You. Do?"

Again, the heat in his veins sharpens into a blunt throb. Sweat beads across his face and it feels like he's suddenly trapped inside an oven, but instead it's his body. And it's overheating his own brain because he has no semblance of thought beyond his burning anger.

"I'll show you some pity, Stark... you don't have to worry. Mrs. Stark is being well taken care of. Though, once your daughter is born, her usefulness will have run its course and I can't ensure her safety beyond that point. The Stark line is sacred after all, and *she* isn't the one with your blood in her veins."

They want Morgan too... Haven't these damn bastards taken enough of his kids away?

Tony jerks against the chains and forces his head to turn away as his throat swells and spasm with pangs of desperation and far too many emotions he's not used to. It's been a long time since he's been so desperate; so... incapable. He hated the feeling of being helpless. The rope around his wrists only seemed to tighten and he thinks maybe the blood circulation has been officially cut off.

"Wow... still nothing?" The man laughs in disbelief, leaning in closer to Tony like he was trying to get a look at his face to see if he was crying yet. "Maybe you're tougher than I thought."

He steps away, hands being shoved in his pocket as he turns at the waist to look behind him at the

heavy door.

“Oh! By the way, I thought you should know that Parker’s work on your Allegiance design is... well, it has quite the potential. I know it’s already in development and I can’t wait to test it out on Harley.” He watches Tony carefully, head tilting to the side to see if that would illicit another fervid reaction.

Tony’s head slowly and carefully turns back to face him. His chin is tucked closer to his chest, but his one eye is boring into him, reddened around the edges, and far more intense than he’s ever looked at a man. But he says nothing, all the words needing to be spoken, being said through the one look in his one eye.

Tony could tell the man was egging to get a rise out of him. Wanting him to beg like some prideless coward. And, heck, the man’s already gotten an angry outburst from him, what more does he want?! So, Tony holds his breath and bottles in any urge to retaliate just like he’s learned since a child.

“He’s a rowdy one... he won’t go down without a fight.” The man gave him an odd look; something different from the others. It wasn’t so much a glare as it was a declaration of some sort. Something to mirror frustration and malice all at once. “A lot like you. Maybe that’s why you took such a liking for my son.”

And just as the man was probably expecting of him, Tony’s head snapped up immediately. His one eye widened, bringing a sharp sting to it.

And now, the man-- Harley’s father-- was glaring. “He may call you his father, but I plan to put an end to that really quick.”

Tony blinked and, maybe it was because he looked surprised, or his hackles lowered for a small moment at the offhand remark of Harley referring to him as his *father*, but the man simply looked at him and cocked his head to the side. “Why do you look so surprised, Stark? Or, are you finally realizing how helpless you are? You have no power here. The boy you’ve claimed as a son cried for his father to come and save him; to protect him. I knew he didn’t mean me. He meant you... and you weren’t there; you *won’t* be there,. But I will. And maybe that will help him remember what I taught him. Maybe then he won’t be so quick to tears and be so dependent on a man that can’t be depended on. You’re a Stark, and Stark men were not meant to be fathers. It’s written in the stars. You, over anyone, should know this, Anthony.”

“Don’t call me that!” Tony spits out through gritted teeth. He *hated* that name. It was the name his father gave him... and he always hated it.

Does he whimper? He doesn’t know. All he feels is a strong, painful scratch against his throat as he drops his head and angry, frustrated tears finally break past his eye. Harley was asking for him... and he didn’t come. He had promised to protect him and keep him safe and he couldn’t even damn well do that. The heat in his chest made it so hard to breathe and he can feel a thick sheen of sweat blanket his body.

“So, I don’t believe it will take very long for him to turn against you, especially with the helpful insight you’ve offered us. Soon, he’ll be a Hydra goon just like the rest of us and I just know how much you’re going to hate that Stark... your own self-proclaimed son... Hydra.”

Tony felt his mouth open, saliva stuck to his lips and tongue like glue and his throat felt like it was on fire. He could feel his heartbeat picking up speed as his slowly diminishing self control suffocated him.

“Don’t.”

The word was a mistake because it only urged the man on further.

“Oh, and let’s not forget about Peter. He’s your favorite I’m guessing.” The man clicked his tongue in disapproval. “Such bad parenting, Stark... picking favorites like that. Y’know I’m just curious... if you had to choose for one to live, and one to die... which would you choose?”

And Tony’s body twitches with a painful jerk as if he’d been struck in the face. He squeezes his eyes shut and wills the racing of his heart to calm down. It seems the faster it beats the hotter it gets and, god, it *burns* .

“No answer? Well, I guess that won’t make any difference in the end. The decision’s already been made. My brother screwed up and the Boss isn’t one to take pity. That’s the only way I was able to sneak in here to see you, it’s been a while since there’s been a public execution this noteworthy. And being killed right alongside your toddler son? Well, damn if that isn’t poetic. It’s the event of the century, and everybody’s more than ready to celebrate. It’s too bad you’re stuck here with me. You’ll have to miss the party... I know you’d probably enjoy the opportunity of watching Richard Parker die. Although, it’d probably put quite a damper on things when you had to watch your child die alongside him. So, maybe it’s a good thing you’re here.”

Tony’s throat dried and he’s looking back up at him and now his *eyes* are burning. Not that typical dry eyed burn, it was one to match the heat scorching every exposed and hidden piece of flesh on his body. Like he was surrounded by a blazing fire.

And when the man finally turns his way once again, gets a look at his one eye, he sutters and takes a sudden step back. His head jerks to the side just a bit so he was looking at Tony from an angle as his eyes slowly skirted from his toes now braced against the heated floor, to his fingers now tightly wrapped around the sizzling rope laced around his hands.

“Stark?” For the first time he sounded unsure; anxious. Tony’s not sure what was all of a sudden making him so nervous. Was his anger really that prominent. Maybe it was the way his chest was heaving so intensely. Was his scowl and glare finally getting to him? It isn’t until he feels his entire body erupt in an unbearable flare of heat, like licks of a fire scorching his skin, and he cries out with a grating scream, does he realize what might be wrong. His throat spasms in that familiar way when he would get too worked up, but this time instead of feeling the shock... it only seems to fuel the fire.

Maybe Richard’s Extremis was going to work after all. He was going to die. It most definitely felt like he was being burned alive.

But then he feels the rope suddenly give way around his burning hands and he lands flat on his feet, and then falls to one knee when he staggers with the lack of balance. He braced his intact hand on the ground as he catches his breath and takes a moment to restore the strength in his bones, and absorb then remit the fire in his veins. His chest felt heavy, but now he can feel the strength to support it and his lungs are enlivened with a breath of fresh air and he’s filled with a new found sense of determination as his anger builds upon his power.

He looks up and finds this man that claims to be the father of his sons, this no good Hydra trash, backed up even further towards the door with an odd look in his eyes; confused, terrified, and was that shock?

Slowly, Tony stands. His vision is obscured and faded by a dark, heated hue of color at the corners of his field of view. And he glances down at his hands to find that they match that same tone. A

soft glow of orange and red coated his irritated skin, and highlighted by the radiant glimmer that could be trailed up and through his veins like some sort of fairy light display.

The heat is still present; it still hurts, but now he can feel the underlying potency of the energy coursing through him, and with that he takes a shuddering step forward. Narrowing his eyes as he finds his step and finds his fury to drive him even closer to the man retreating towards the door.

He grabs him. Wraps a single hand around his neck and lifts him from the floor with a strength he's never displayed before in his life. He can feel an all encompassing urge in his body to twitch, like the energy was just too much and in need of some sort of outlet, so he *squeezes*. The man chokes, and he takes such a satisfying delight in watching as his own hand burns the sensitive skin of his neck, breathing in the stench of burning flesh and finding he quite enjoyed it.

"Where is he?" He growls, tossing the man away with a strong arm. He's sent sailing several feet, and he grapples at the ground as he collapses in on himself with several harsh breaths, clutching at his still burning throat. The mask still remains, keeping him from seeing his whole face, but that is the least of Tony's concerns at the moment. He's more focused on the man's surprising response to his outburst. He doesn't look scared, as Tony rounds on him once more, and approaches with heavy footsteps. He looks more impressed than anything else, and for some reason that irks him.

"Take a left when you leave the room..." He coughs roughly and points to the door. "I'm sure you can find your way just fine being the genius you are."

And then Tony feels another shock erupt in his throat, and it halts him for just a moment as the heat in his body slowly eats away at the small surge. And then he glances down at the man, something clutched tightly in his fist, and Tony frowns. He moves quickly.

He kneels beside the man, pulling back his fist and sending it right into the man's ear, knocking him clean out as he slowly peels his fingers away from the tiny, familiar metal object in his hand. He lifts it, frowns at it, then presses down on one of the two buttons with a frustrated huff.

This was one of his earliest designs that he'd scrapped. And now he can fully remember why he refrained from actually manufacturing it.

This time, the sudden surge is stronger, and the consistent burn he had been feeling diminishes just a bit more and so does that obscured hue in his eyes as he takes on the sudden rush of electricity stemming from within his throat.

Wrong button.

His smaller limbs involuntarily tremor, as it runs its course and as soon as it's over he doesn't waste a second to push his hand into his mouth, fingers immediately delving into his throat in search of the source. He chokes painfully around his fingers, and he can feel the warmth of blood dripping down his throat before he can feel the tiny circular implant lodged into the side of his esophagus. He pulls at it just as he presses down on the other button on the small device. It releases, but not without a painful scratch and his scream is muffled around his hand as he chokes once more before tearing the object from his mouth and tossing it aside as he heaves breath into his lungs once more.

He braces one hand on his knee and looks up at the door across the room. The heat had petered out into an uncomfortable warmth, and the surging pump in his veins was no longer so prominent. His exhaustion was kicking back in, but that did by no means diminish his determination to get to his family and get them all out safely.

So he walked up to the door, pulled it open, and turned left.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, yeah, a couple things!

One... I had no idea this chapter was gonna be this long. Like, seriously this is only half the chapter I had planned and I think it's like the longest chapter anyways! So, yeah, this is only half of what it was supposed to be and THAT is why it took so long and the second half will be next chapter

Two... isn't it such a convenient coincidence that all three parties have all escaped at the same time? XD lol. I srsly couldn't deal with things already being more complicated than they are. It's already a struggle. And there are WAY too many factors that go into escaping from some place... gosh

And lastly, there is a LOT going on this chapter, and I'm sure it might be a bit confusing, so if there are any questions, as always reach out and I'll be happy to answer them! Also I know there wasn't much Peter this chapter, but I promise he'll be back very soon!

Anywho! Thanks for reading. I love y'all and I hope to hear from ya

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER GUYS PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE READING CHAPTER!!

One... there are some pretty explicit scenes in this chapter. I will be marking these scenes by bolding the first word of the paragraph so you know which ones to skip if you don't want to read that type of thing. Two, there's a kinda graphic depiction of sickness, but it is nothing more than what has been in this fic before. I will still mark this one by bolding the first letter of the paragraphs. Keep in mind I won't be bolding the whole scene or even the more minor violent, only the paragraphs with the graphic displays in them so tread lightly.

Otherwise, I do believe this is the chapter you all have been waiting for. So enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's official. He's pretty sure he's lost. He had already retraced his steps to his and Pepper's prison room they'd just come from and then he recalled the steps he had counted in his head when they took him from his old room. He made his way back there just in case they had stupidly decided to bring Peter back there before he ran off.

It was a long shot and he knew it was... but he tried anyways. He counted each step in his head. He scoured every corner and checked every door. There weren't very many hiding places for Peter to squeeze into and while that would make his effort in finding Peter easier in the end... that particular upside depended on the low chances of the large number of Hydra soldiers not stumbling across him first.

But he did his best to keep his hopes up as he counted.

Right. Thirty Steps. Left. Seventy-Two. Left. Twenty-Three.

There were no guards or soldiers in sight, which was odd... He always had his gun ready though, and a deeper part of him-- a very, very, very deep, dark part of him-- was only a little disappointed that he didn't have the opportunity to use it again... as terrible as that sounded. He just wants a bit more practice before they get out of here and Tony's forbids him from touching a gun till he's thirty.

As soon as he thinks it he immediately takes it back, because of course, per the laws of Murphy, three maskless Hydra soldiers passed through the intersection in front of him and turned to continue down the hall in front of him. Harley immediately turns to hide behind one of the protruding pillars patterned along either side of the wall. Their backs were to him as they walked with rambunctious laughter and wide, careless gestures of their arms... or just one of them, really. The guy in the middle seemed to be the hyper one, the two on either side of him seemed to be a bit more on the mellow side.

They all looked young though. Very young. Like only a few years older than him type of young. They didn't seem to appear all that rushed to go find Peter... which can either mean a good thing or a very, very bad thing.

It took a couple moments to slow his breathing and get over that heart-stopping jump scare. He decides maybe it'd be a good idea to follow them. They didn't seem to be all that aware of their surroundings, and they were talking fairly loud... so maybe if he could tag along long enough they'll let something slip that would help him find Peter or Tony.

--I heard that Parker sliced his throat," the middle boy chuckled, cackling maniacally, "and he screamed so loud his tongue got stuck and stopped the bleeding just before he died."

"That makes no sense." The one on the left grumbled, shoving the man when he got a bit too much in his personal space. He was sent giggling into the stoic and silent guy on his right.

"Yeah, well it makes more sense than what they're saying actually happened!" And that statement seems to earn him another shove.

Harley frowned. Now, if that wasn't intriguing gossip he doesn't know what is.

"Oh c'mon," the middle guy exclaims, throwing his arms in the air with a dramatic flare. "Don't tell me you believe that shit! You think Stark's body just suddenly caught on fire when his heart started up again. That's total bullshit. Stark's dead, we all know it. They're just trying to cover up the fact that Parker got the best of the Boss and terminated Stark like we all knew he would."

"You've seen what Parker's done up in that lab of his," The previously silent man on the right says. "And Barnes? I wouldn't be surprised if I was told that he spontaneously combusted either with all that shit they're pumping into him every day." His voice remains even and unperturbed as he continues in his patterned and rhythmic step beside the other two, "Who's to say Parker didn't shoot Stark up with something like that."

They were talking about Tony!

What the hell?

"What was that?!" And then all of a sudden all three heads were turning towards him... and he thinks that maybe those thoughts weren't exactly thoughts in his head. And he wishes his knee jerk reaction would've been to pull his gun out and shoot them dead before they had a chance... but something was stopping him. Maybe it was because they were so young, or maybe it was because... they looked so much *not* like the Hydra he was used to that he hesitated. It's like seeing a Stormtrooper without their helmet. He felt frozen as they moved closer to him with their guns ready.

"You're that Keener kid, aren't you?" The guy on the right finally concludes, pointing his finger and looking at both the others with an amused smirk. "This is that kid Allen was telling us about." He turns back to Harley.

"Wassup Sprout?"

Allen?

Well that sure as hell explained a lot... it connected those last dots between the moment Allen helped them to the car outside and everything went dark and the moment he woke up on the floor of that room.

And that broke the spell. His wide eyes narrowed into a sharp glare and his open mouth thinned into a stern frown. He *hated* that name. And the fact it was being used by Hydra scum? Even worse. The three of them stalked closer, a wicked grin spread across the middle guy's face.

“You should be back in your room--”

Harley lifts both hands, each one grasping a pistol and pointing directly at them. The guy on the right immediately retaliates by pointing his own piece at Harley.

That doesn't deter him.

“Where's Tony?”

“Who? Daddy Dearest?” The question is followed by a demeaning snarl.

Harley stiffens and he doesn't bother to grace their jibe remarks with a response. So he repeated his question with more fervor, adjusting his hold on both pistols to ease the cramped sensation in his fingers.

“He's long gone kid. Just give it up now and you might be able to walk away from this without getting hurt.” It was a harsh threat from the guy on the left, with a heavy grit in his voice that sent nervous tingling to Harley's toes. Two guns were pointed right at him, and he wasn't confident enough in Hydra's need for his survival to think they wouldn't dare shoot him in the head at the first misstep

He frowns, urging for some magical awakening to come over his body so he can beat the crap out of these three, but he *knows* he's got no chance. Three to one. He can barely handle one to one on his best days. And as much as he'd love to punch them in their fucking teeth, he refrains, keeping in mind one of Happy's earlier lessons.

He hadn't been fond of that lesson in particular. He'd been much too eager to get into the hands-on stuff... but, well, now he can sorta see the importance.

It's good to know when you're in over your head. Knowing your limits is just as important as knowing how to fight.

Always have a getaway plan.

He's quick on his feet. He knows he is. Before he came to live at the Stark Tower he'd spent plenty of his time running away from cops and big brutes chasing him down after he got a bit too confident with his pickpocketing.

So he runs. He dashed around the corner the three men crossed over from moments earlier. His knees nearly buckled in their weakened state as his bare feet pound against the hard floor in his desperate push to go faster; the beat just in time with the hammering thud thud thud of his heart. It deafens any shouts or resounding gunshots he knows must be echoing down the hall behind him. His vision felt blurry, and at some point he swears he lost all feeling in the lower half of his body, like some detachment of his soul from his body as his focus zeroes in on the next corner he might be able to weave around.

So, he does, he spots the recessed portion of a hallway to signify an upcoming intersection. He flies around the corner and almost instantly collides into something hard, or rather... someone. Familiar hands grasp his shoulder and squeeze tight, and the harsh thud of his heart stops completely, the noise overtaken by his own harsh breaths as his eyes widen in disbelief. His chest stutters in a panic, body freezing completely as he stands in the arms of his father.

He looks up at the familiar face, the blood completely draining from his own. It'd been a while since he'd seen him, a lifetime it seemed... and even after all this time, those eyes were still able to strike a delirious fear into his heart. One that had him freezing and eager to comply at the smallest

instruction, years of forgotten conditioning returning with one simple look.

“Pa?” His voice cracks, and he can feel his eyes stinging and the following tingle that rushes to his heels urging him to run away.

And as the words leave his mouth he hears the loud footsteps of the three that had followed him come to a stop behind him. He hears the stiffened pronouncement of “sir” but beyond that, there’s nothing else he can focus on except the cold grip around his heart, screaming in fervor to wrench himself from this man’s arms and run as far away as he possibly could.

He feels the grip on his shoulders tighten slightly as his father speaks rigidly to the trio still standing behind him.

“Go.”

And just like that they’re gone... and Harley’s alone with him... again.

“It’s good to see you, son. Still running from your problems I see.”

Harley scowled at him, tugging against his hold, but unable to break away.

“I never ran.”

The man smiles at him. “Maybe not of what you could remember. You were only a cowardly young boy when I left and you still haven’t changed.”

The harsh slap of words gave Harley the strength to tear himself away from the man and back up a good three feet.

“How the hell would you know?!” Harley shouts at him with a scowl. “You left and I grew up so I could take care of *your* job. I’m *not* a coward.”

He sees the way his father grits his teeth in irritation. “I see you’ve forgotten how to hold your tongue, son. Stark’s been a bit too lenient with you hasn’t he?”

That eerie prickling in Harley’s throat is back and his heart is *pounding*, blood thrumming against his ears like a tidal wave. His father stepped closer to him and he took a panicked step back in return.

“No,” Harley sternly corrected with a small croak and confident shake of his head. “Tony’s everything I needed. Everything you could *never* be.”

“Hey!” The man’s suddenly in front of him, only one large step putting them face to face once more, an angry glimmer against his bruising eye and his blood-stained teeth bared in a snarl. “You don’t talk to me that way. You’ve apparently forgotten who your real father is, boy. Don’t think I’m oblivious to the way you’ve imprinted on Tony Stark like some orphaned, infantile child.” He reaches out to grasp Harley’s bicep, tugging him closer. “I’ll ensure you remember the only one deserving of your respect.” His other hand lifts to grip Harley’s jaw. Not at all similar to the loving caress Pepper would affectionately grant him, or the reassuring hold of Tony when he had something important to say. No, this was firm, threatening, and the norm of his childhood, and he’s sure he’d feel the bruising of his strong grip in a few hours.

Harley fights against him, tugging frantically to get away, and finding his desperation only seemed to draw out the fear-fueled tears that had been building behind his eyes. “Get away from me. You’re not my dad! You’ll *never* be my Dad!”

And without even a moment's warning, Harley felt a stinging warmth against his cheek as his head snapped to the side. His hand instantly reaches up to cradle his cheek, feeling a rush of memories from the days he'd been so familiar with that very slap.

It's such an aching contrast of Tony. Of the man who had refused to lay a hand on him, even in moments he probably most deserved it. Of the man that had broken him down to a state of vulnerability where he could be comforted in the way he should have been as a child. Of the man that had given him the strength, the will, and the want to fight for what he loved and believed in. The man who'd *given* him something to love... something to believe in. The same man that was probably very well dead. His *Dad* .

And the strength of those thoughts; those memories, helps him break free from the reigns of his terror and the conditioned behaviors he's been reeled back into at the sight of the man responsible for the beginning of his laundry list of traumas. It helps him pull away just far enough to pull his loaded pistol out from the back of his waistband, and point it right between his eyes.

His mouth dropped into a heavy frown and his nostrils flared, pointing the muzzle at the same spot he had on his mother. But this time he wouldn't regret pulling the trigger. In fact, he *wanted* to.

His father raises both hands beside his head to surrender. "Maybe I underestimated you, son."

"Don't call me that!" Harley spits out, bile stirring in his gut.

They stared at each other, and Harley hated the sight. He could see Peter... Peter's eyes, Peter's nose, Peter's mouth... every inch of that man's face screamed *Peter* , and Harley can't believe he hadn't seen the resemblance before. It was startling, and it angered him, thinking that this man standing in front of him had the right to claim Peter as his own kin. A child as sweet and perfect as his kid brother could be related to a man the likes of him. And it infuriated him.

"Maybe I was wrong to hire those men to kill you," the man slowly muses, tilting his head to the side, "you might be of use to us after all."

There's a slight commotion from the hall over and Harley refrains from breaking his gaze. A single moment's break in concentration could give this man all he needed to escape and he can't risk giving up this opportunity. So he ignores it. It isn't until he hears the sharp cry of a man several yards away and the distinct scrap of metal on metal that he turns his head to see a Hydra uniformed soldier impaled by a short staff against the wall. Harley thinks it might be one of the guys from earlier. And then an angry roar follows and Harley falters, fearing that some mutated monster from a failed evil science experiment had broken free and was running rampant in the halls.

And just as he turns back to face his father, he finds the man already disappearing around the shadows of another corner further down the hall. So, Harley turns again, ready to put up a fight with whatever angry monster had unleashed it's fury on that Hydra man. His glowing silhouette breaches the corner threshold and rushes forward to clutch the man's jaw in a vice grip.

The words the orange man speaks are in an undertone Harley can't hear, and for some reason he remains standing there like some idiot waiting to be trampled and mauled by this oddly familiar man.

But then the glowing man shoves the Hydra soldier and bellows enough for Harley to distinctly hear his words. And instantly, he recognizes the voice and his heart flutters in relief, the pent up anxiety suddenly draining out of him in one fell swoop as a relieved sob escapes his throat. He didn't have to pretend to be brave anymore.

“My sons!” The man shouts “Where are they keeping them?! Where’s Richard Parker?!”

Harley opens his mouth, urging the words to come out to draw his attention, but nothing but a single choked syllable could break through his stuttered sobs and cries of relief.

“DAD!”

“I’ll ask one more time...” Tony’s teeth are bared and grit together, spit dropping from his mouth and onto the panicked boy beneath him. No older than twenty it looked. But he was dressed in a Hydra uniform... he was Hydra. No mercy.

He’d witnessed Tony plow through his five other compatriots without so much a lift of his finger and now here he was towering over him with a heavy knee pressing down further into his chest with every breath. Both hands cradling his skull, thumbs pressing down on his cheekbones.

“...where are my sons?”

“Pl-please sir,” the kid begged, “I-I don’t know.”

That wasn’t the answer he was looking for, and with only a one blow of his fist, he’s out like a light, the imprint of Tony’s glowing fingers now charred with imprinted burns into his skin.

And with that he was off with his search once more, chin and head hanging low as his impaired vision focused on the way ahead, stepping over the bodies he’d discarded earlier. He could feel the heat again, nearing just as intense as before, but now it was simmering into a stable base that he was slowly growing used to. With every what would be cut or abrasion, the burn was condensed for only moments before any semblance of pain bled away. He’s not so sure of his feelings with this so-called new ‘power’ of his, but if it would help him be better suited to finding and rescuing his kids, then he’ll take it. And it’s not like he has anymore room left for questions and forethought with his anger being so centralized, being fed by the consistent fire in his veins.

He’s brought around another corner, fingers fisted and flexing with the surplus of energy, feet stomping loudly with every step. It draws the attention of the three loitering agents. Two guns are pulled, he counts, along with one extended stun-gun staff, and an obvious newbie right between the other two who takes off down the hall at the mere sight of him.

One. Two. No Three bullets. One to each shoulder and one to the chest. They hit dead on, he feels the impact and the breach through his skin and flesh, but soon the sharp tingle of heat consolidates and the wound is practically nonexistent. Giving him ample time to come up on them. One hand lifted in a swift motion to disassemble one of the guns with what could barely be considered a grasp of his fingers, whipping it back around with the force of his spin to land the pistol whip on the cheek of the other, sending him flying back into the wall. And while his back is still turned he reaches out and grips his previous target by the neck, lifting him off his feet as he squeezes. It’s slow enough to allow a sharp scream to break free from his lips as his skin sizzles slightly, but soon he’s quietened by the collapsing of his esophagus, and he’s dropping to the floor.

Two left.

The spear whizzes by the right side of his head, his instincts twisting his body to the side just in time to watch the lick of the small sparks emitting from the point of the long staff. He turns his orange hued gaze onto the wielder of the staff he’d just thrown back with a hit, an unimpressed frown on his lips. One hand lifts to grip the end, body absorbing the satisfying tingles now stemming from his palms, and the other swings up towards where the man grips it, leveraging the

weapon from his hands and spinning it into his own with an elegant twirl. His movements continue on instinct alone as he jabs it forward quickly, impaling the small point of the staff into the man's chest. His body seizes with the aftershocks of the electrical waves, but after a quick dislodge, he's limp on the ground like the other one.

No mercy.

He drops the staff and drops to one knee to rifle through the man's belt long enough to grasp the handle of his gangly knife, and with a simple flick of his wrist the blade is sailing down the hall impaling the fleeing man in his back. And Tony watches with hooded eyes, rising slowly to his feet as the man stumbles and spins clumsily to stare back at him, back only a few feet from the wall of the corner of the adjacent hall. So, Tony takes the opportunity to kick the staff back into his hand. It takes almost no effort to release the ungodly amount of strength as he pitches the staff like a spear to pin him to the wall.

He stalks towards him, taking his time to approach the man, finding a sickening amount of glee in watching the coward flail helplessly to free himself, but the staff was lodged firmly in the metal. He reaches him with only a few more strides, grasping his jaw firmly between his fingers. He's done playing into the sick games of these people. He's quickly losing his patience and any semblance of control he may have left.

"Where are my kids?"

It's a simple question. He's not sure why no one is capable of answering it. All he receives is a pitiful whine of terror and that just *feeds* the steam clouding his head. The idea that such a powerful organization can be relying on such a cowardly and weak foundation. How they're able to thrive with men the likes of this one has his hackles raising in anger and disgust.

"My sons!" He pushes against the man's chest, forcing the blade of the knife in his back to lodge further into the muscle. "Where are they keeping them?! Where's Ricahrd Parker?!"

"--DAD!"

His chest spasms frantically at the word and his neck snaps to the side, fearing he'd simply imagined it. But he hadn't... Harley stood only yards away and instantly, Tony felt the heat in his body extinguish, the energy and strength now descending into pain and exhaustion.

His chest constricts and he chokes on his own response, but Harley doesn't seem to need a confirmation of his arrival. The kid's sprinting towards him, eyes squeezed shut and face bright red at the strained repression of the tears already spilling down his face.

"Dad-dad-dad-dad-dad..." he chants, colliding into Tony's chest and grappling for purchase around the man's waist, clawing at the tender flesh in his father's back to pull himself closer.

Tony holds him tight without any plan of ever letting go, one arm tight around his waist and the other around his shoulder holding him close. His head dips down to press into his kid's shoulder, feeling the soft brush of his hair against the sharp ridge of his nose and for the first time in what felt like an eternity his tears were out of relief.

"You're okay," he whispers quietly, hand cradling the back of his boy's head when he feels the aftershock of a harsh sob ripple through his smaller frame. "It's okay, you're okay."

"Dad," he croaks. It's the only word he's seemed to be able to voice and Tony has to say it's probably the most beautiful thing he's ever heard fall from the kid's mouth. "Dad-dad-dad-dad."

“Shhhh, it’s okay,” he gently strokes his hair and lifts his head to press a soft kiss on the side of Harley’s temple, the arm around his waist squeezing him even closer to him like somehow he believes that if they were close enough he’d be able to shield him from whatever terror has these tremors rippling through him like waves of an aftershock

“I thought you were dead,” Harley finally manages to croak, words beyond the single syllable he’d been chanting since their bodies collided. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

And Tony had thought the same thing, hanging there, arms suspended and bound above his head by a braided rope, with that looming mockery hanging even heavier on his shoulders when the man in front of him only reminded him of his inadequacy to keep his own family safe.

But he can’t say that. Harley can’t ever know he had been so close to giving up. So he doesn’t.

“I’m right here Mimmo, you’re safe now.”

Harley only clutched him tighter. Tony cranes his head back to look down at the kid tucked against his chest. He gently pushes away some of his overgrown hair to expose the right side of his cheek where several bruises have blossomed in irritation, highlighted by the dried blood around the split skin beneath his eye. Gently, he brushes his thumb over the abrasion, finding that heat from earlier slowly returning as an angered growl forced itself through his dry throat. He then notices the faded trail of red leading from his ear to his jaw and the crisp strands of hair glued together by the dried blood. And soon, the anger is aggravating the heat slowly building it’s way back up from his toes and he can feel the top of his head slowly begin to burn, literally, with fury.

Whoever was responsible for this... there would be no mercy.

He roughly cups the back of Harley’s head once more, pulling him in so his face was tucked just beneath his chin so he couldn’t see the rising anger and frustration in Tony’s face if he looked up.

He had failed to keep his promise... the promise to keep his kids safe.

A deafening bang interrupted his thoughts from behind him, followed by a sharp, sudden pain shooting through his shoulder. It causes him to stumble forward, knocking Harley back a step or two as well, but it didn’t take much longer than that second for Tony to jump into action.

The bullet was lodged into his left shoulder blade, and it stung like hell, but it seemed to have revived his earlier state of pure, rampant energy, and soon he could feel the flames of heat dancing at his fingertips. He holds Harley close to act as a shield as two more shots rang out, and then he grabs the pistol the boy had wedged into his waistband and he twists his right arm back and takes out all four in a matter of seconds while still keeping his body turned to shield and protect Harley.

Harley fights out of his hold, pushing away abruptly, as if he’d been burned, but Tony let’s him go in favor of stalking back around the corner where he’d turned and making sure their way was clear. Things were fine, but now the rush to find his family and get them out safely has returned. The tender moment was ruined, it’d been rudely interrupted, and now it was time to get back to business.

So, he swings back around to face the man he still had pinned to the wall. His eyes seemed to be drooping, he looked a bit out of it from the blood loss so Tony slammed the side of his fist onto the metal wall beside his head to wake him up, followed by a loud shout. “HEY!”

The young man startled awake and returned to looking up at him with wide eyes.

“Where are they holding Peter Parker?”

The man's good arm lifts shakily to point in the direction he was originally headed, no words to add to it. But it was the first soldier he's come across that's given any semblance of assistance in his search, and he'll take whatever help he can get in this goddamned maze.

Tony grasps the thin staff between his fingers, flexing them around the smooth material and watching as the grey metal is highlighted by the heat of his hold and the bright yellow and oranges that paint over the dull coloring. Then he pulls it away from the wall, and the man releases a pained wail as he slumps against it. He drops the staff, not noticing the melted indent of his grip molded into the metal.

Tony doesn't give him much time to situate himself before he has him by the shoulder and spins him around so his chest is pressed against the wall instead. He grasps the handle of the knife protruding from his back and does the same as he did the staff, quickly dislodging it from its place between the man's shoulder blades. Then he presses his palm flat against the now exposed, inflamed flesh on the man's back and a loud, ear-piercing scream reverberates through the long hallways. His teeth grit tightly together as he presses even harder onto the wound, pinching bits of skin together with the tips of his fingers and listening to the satisfying sizzle as the heat of his touch slowly melts the flesh back together.

He completely forgets that Harley was there with him. Maybe it was because of the clouded nature this newfound fire in his soul has over him, or maybe it's something else, but he doesn't remember until Harley's saying that word again and his hand is hovering above his forearm.

"Dad! Stop it! What are you doing to him?!"

The man continued to scream and wail, and Tony wasn't letting up. Not until he noticed Harley standing beside him.

The heat muted itself for just a moment as a small bit of sense came back to him, though there was still a harsh bite to his tone as he spoke and pushed Harley out of the way.

"I'm cauterizing his wounds so he doesn't pass out on us." He grits his teeth and spins his victim once more, pressing his back up against the wall. And before the man at his mercy has enough time to fully catch his breath, he's pressing his palm to the wound of his shoulder where blood was spilling generously. The heat had been diluted slightly, so it wasn't nearly as effective, but the longer Tony focused his mind, and the anger he felt knowing that his family had been hurt because of him, the quicker and easier it was to intensify the heat, and soon the man was writhing beneath him with screams once more. Tony does his best to speak above the man's screams. "I need him to lead us to Peter and your mother."

"I know where Mom is!" Harley pipes up quickly, eager to supply any help he could. His eyes were still puffy and glossy, but his resolve had returned and that sense of responsibility he's had to carry on his own for the past three weeks was back. He had his moment to break down and be given comfort, and now he was stepping up to the plate.

Tony paused what he was doing and turned to look at his son. He noticed the startled step back the kid took when he got a close look at his face, but Tony didn't think anything of it, much more focused on the words that had spilled from the boy's mouth and the direction he was pointing down the hall behind them.

"Is she okay?"

Harley quickly nods his head. "Yeah she's just resting up in a bathroom we found. She-- um..." he bites down on his lip, and glances down at his bare feet. And Tony *knows* there's something

important he's not telling him.

Tony narrows his eyes, releasing the man in his hold completely to hover towards Harley, and the man collapses in a heap. The spark of warmth dancing at his fingertips mellow out slowly from will alone. The last thing he needed to do was burn his own kid with his carelessness. "What aren't you telling me Harley?"

Harley winces at being caught and lifts his head back up to look at Tony, one eye squinted shut and a slight grimace on his face as he breaks the news to his father.

"She-she went into labor and-and--"

Immediately, Tony finds his earlier focus on Peter taking a slight detour as he hears word that his wife had gone into labor. "Take me to her! Right now!" Hand reaching behind him to grasp the collar of the Hydra soldier and dragging him along behind him as he began his way down the hall at a frantic pace. Harley jumps in to lead the way back the way he came.

Tony doesn't say another word the entire walk, or rather, brisk walk, back to the bathroom Harley had left Pepper behind in. It isn't until they come across a scattering of Hydra soldier bodies that Tony pauses and glances around with admiration. He turns his head up at Harley, who was a few yards further down the hall standing patiently for him to follow. Tony gestures to the massacre of the eight Hydra soldiers.

"You did this?"

Harley nods, chin lifting slightly as the shadow of a smile upturns his lips. "Yes sir."

He releases the collar of the man he's been dragging with them and approaches Harley with a proud smile. And slowly he reaches up his hand to gently pat the boy's face. He holds his hand there, thumb resting just beneath his eye, the pad of his finger drifting over the small abrasion there, but then he draws his hand behind the kid's head, gripping the back of his neck firmly to pull him closer. He tilts his head down and presses their foreheads together. His other hand comes up to grip his jaw firmly, his proud smile growing into a bare-toothed grin as he squeezes affectionately. "I'm so fuckin' proud of you," he croaks.

The moments interrupted yet again at the sound of a sharp, high-pitched cry. Tony startles, head snapping up like a dog on alert. He releases Harley slowly, pointing his finger behind him in a silent instruction for Harley to stay, watch their prisoner, and watch his back as he follows the faint noise down into the hall. His pace picks up the closer he gets to the noise, coming to a small jog as tears slowly begin to pull at his eyes and his breath catches in his throat. He slows at the last door staring at the mangled door handle. Then he glances down further to find the dark contrast of blood pouring out onto the grey floor from beneath the door.

Slowly, he reaches out to gently push the door open, dread drawing out any moisture left in his mouth. His heart begins to race once more and along with it the familiar sensation of heat dancing at his fingertips.

He presses the palm of his hand against the heavy door and pushes. The room was dark, and the sliver of light that spills into the room from the hall falls over the outline of a large boot. The further he pushes the door, the better he can hear the now muffled cries of a distressed infant and the better he can see the corpse of the uniformed soldier sprawled on the ground with blood pooling at the crown of his head.

"Pepper" he chokes gently, his own throat seeming to strangle him.

Then he hears a sharp inhale and the familiar soothing voice of his wife coming from within the shadow of darkness. “Tony?” It’s soft, quiet, hesitant, and so, so tentative and nervous it nearly breaks his heart. He finishes pushing the door open and the light falls onto the form of his wife, one arm cradling a bundle made from the familiar plaid shirt of his son’s right outside, and in the other she holds in her hand the distinct contours of a Hydra soldier’s gun. It’s gripped tightly in her paling knuckles, shaking violently as she slowly lowers it to the hard tile floor next to her.

Her lip slowly quivers, eyes glinting with unshed tears as her bloody hand now lifted to outstretch towards him.

“Honey,” he mutters under his breath as he scrambles forward and drops to his knees beside her, grabbing her wrist to gently press her still shaking, stained palm to his own bloody cheek. He presses a gentle kiss to the sensitive skin there and closes his eyes as he leans forward, lifting his own hand to cradle her face gently as she cries.

“You’re okay,” Tony mutters gently as she falls forward, face pressing into the crevice between his neck and shoulder. He rests his hand against the back of her head, relishing in the familiar comforting feel of her soft hair against his palm.

“I thought you were gone,” she whispered against his skin, pressing a soft kiss to his exposed collarbone.

“Honey, I don’t got the time to die. I rose up from the dead, I do it all the time. Nothing can keep me away from you.” He holds her tight. And after too short a time she pulls away, gaze focusing in on the small bundle cradled in her arms and Tony follows her gaze, finding himself enraptured at the first sight of his baby girl.

“Oh Pep,” he chuckles softly, raising his injured hand to hover beside the swaddled hood over her head. “She’s gorgeous.”

He can feel her eyes on him. He knows she’s smiling, but he can’t tear his eyes away from the small infant in her arms, mouth open wide as her hiccuped cries continue to echo around the small cramped bathroom.

Before he realizes what she’s doing, Pepper’s slowly pushing the small bundle into his arms and it doesn’t even pass as a thought in his mind to panic about how to hold her. There’s no trepidation, like he would’ve expected there to be. It’s like the stars molded his entire being to do this very thing... to hold his daughter in his arms.

He can feel the warmth of his smile deep in his chest as he looks down on her, a sudden abundance of love just pouring from every crevice of his being as the comforting warmth filled him from head to toe, contrasting against the blazing heat of anger he’s felt far too much already in his lifetime.

“Oh, sweet girl,” he coos gently, lifting his mangled hand slowly to press the tip of his quivering index finger to her tiny chin. He could barely feel the sharp burn of his wrist and shoulder as he moved. She continues to cry, snuffling and sobbing like the end of the world was upon her.

“What’s the matter?”

“She hasn’t stopped crying since...” Pepper trails off slowly in answer as she gestures to the limp form of the dead Hydra soldier who Tony assumes had walked in on them. “I think the noise scared her when I... when I--.”

“It’s okay,” Tony whispers, “you did what you had to.” He lifts his hand to gently pull back the fabric from his baby’s head only to find, to his horror, a small dribble of blood slowly dripping

from the tiny crevice of her ear. It jerks him back into the painful reality they were in, tearing away that precious feeling of a long-awaited reconciliation and replacing it with his heated determination from before. He stands, staggering just a bit at the unsure footing of his weakened legs. Pepper tries to follow him, an inset look of panic on her face at her husband's sudden negative reaction.

“What--what’s wrong?”

Tony doesn’t answer. Only transfers Morgan to the crevice of his injured arm, and uses his other to grasp Pepper by the elbow and help her to her feet. “We need to get the two of you out of here. Right now.”

“Tony! No! The boys are here! They have the boys! Harley’s out looking for Peter! We can’t leave them here.”

Tony doesn’t pause in his work of leading her to the discarded wheelchair in the corner and settling her in gently. He speaks in an offhand manner, mind far more clouded by the plan already beginning to form in his head. “Harley’s right outside. I’ll come back for Peter when you three are out safely, okay?”

“Harley’s here?” Pepper asks as she settles back in the chair. And he doesn’t think to hand Morgan down to her in order to lessen the struggle of pushing the chair out of the cramped room. He’s too scared to let go just yet... he has no way to protect her when she’s out of reach and he can’t handle the thought of failing her *again*. He’s not letting go any time soon, that he knows for a fact. Not until he’s sure she’s safe.

Tony doesn’t bother answering, instead, folding his bottom lip beneath his teeth and releasing a sharp whistle as he carefully nudges the wheelchair through the threshold of the bathroom. And sure enough, Harley comes running with one of the Hydra man’s cuffed wrists in his grip as he stumbles along beside Harley’s hurried pace.

“Ma! You’re okay,” He grins, dropping his hold on the man when they were close enough he was confident he wouldn’t try running off in fear of facing his father’s wrath again. He falls into her open arms and she holds him tight against her, a relieved yet shaky sigh releasing from her chest. She let’s go of him, and Harley stands up to look at Tony who has his crying baby sister cradled in his large arms. She looked so tiny when he held her.

“Come on,” Tony interrupts with a strict and bothered lilt to his already gravelly voice. “We shouldn’t be wasting any more time. You three need to get out of here.” He grabs Harley’s arm to give a slight tug to move him where he wanted him, but Harley yanks it away. The look he gives him is wavering on the thin line between confused and disgusted.

“No, we need to go find Peter! We can’t just leave him here.”

Tony scowls, teeth grating together in his quickly growing frustration. “No. I’d be putting all three of you at risk by going to find Peter right now. I’m getting you to safety first and then I’ll come back for your brother. Now *come on*.” He grabs Harley’s arm again, but, again, Harley tugs it away. This time his anger is prominent.

“You fucker!” He growls. “You’re just going to leave him behind?!”

Tony finds his outrage spike and he can both see and feel the heated spark of orange ingraining in his peripherals as his anger once again begins to come over him. Harley must see that same spark igniting in his eyes and he takes a startled step back as Tony raises his voice. “I am *NOT* leaving him behind! And I am *NOT* going to gamble with the lives of two of my children and my wife!”

He can see the conflicted anger in Harley, deciding whether or not this is a battle he should bother to test him in. “You shouldn’t choose between the lives of your family,” he finally bites out. And Tony knows, god he knows, that Harley speaks from experience... a painful experience... but Tony has experiences of his own; ones he’s had to learn from as well. And as messed up as it is, sometimes those choices have to be made or you risk losing everything altogether.

“Well you’ll come to learn, kid, that life is all about tough choices. It doesn’t really seem to give a shit about the fairness of it all.” He can feel the heavy rock in his throat and the stinging wetness behind his eyes as he reaches out to grip the back of his kid’s neck and pull him closer. “But sometimes you have to have the strength to do what your gut knows is right even when you really don’t want to listen to it. Understand?” He adjusts his hand so now his palm is resting against Harley’s cheek, yet keeping his hold firm to ingrain the message of his words. “I can’t lose you too.”

His fingers catch the tears that fall from Harley’s eyes. “What do you mean too?” He whispers, horror and desperation leaking into his voice.

Tony opens his mouth, hoping for words that would reassure the boy, but he couldn’t find any. And he can’t lie to him... not now, and not about this. So he settles on the truth.

“The chances of Peter... the chances of him being alive... as much as I don’t want to think about it,” he squeezes his eyes shut, “it’s the reality Harley, and we all have to accept that. Once you three are out safely I can put all my focus onto finding him without being distracted by the questionable safety of you three. I *will* come back to find him, okay?”

Harley squints one eye closed, scowling under his breath as he ducks his head. Tony takes what he can get and nudges him behind Pepper’s wheelchair and moves to grab their captive and haul him to his feet. He fists his hand in the man’s collar, lifting him clean off his feet with a far more strained effort than he found it to be earlier.

“Change of plans candy-ass,” he scowls, “where’s the closest exit?”

He drops him when his feet are under him again and the man stumbles to remain upright as a small grogle of a sound escapes his mouth and his hand lifts to point the opposite direction of the hall. Tony gives him a quick kick to his ass and sends him scrambling in the right direction. Tony takes the pistol out and points it at his back. “Lead the way cream puff. And don’t even think about trying to cross me. It won’t end well for you.”

He tucks Morgan close to his chest, cradled and protected by his arm and he glances behind him and tilts his head forward. Harley does as instructed and pushes Pepper forward in the chair, sticking close to the sides of the hall.

It was hard and completely anxiety inducing as they slowly followed their Hydra capture through the silent halls. Morgan’s loud wails hadn’t silenced despite Tony’s best efforts to console her, and the high-pitched reverberations of her distress only seemed to echo forever down the halls and Tony knows it’s impossible that they haven’t been heard already. It’s a hard balance, keeping his only trusted arm outstretched with his gun pointed at the Hydra man’s back and ready in case of an attack, giving him nothing else but a soft bounce of his other arm and charming words to try and comfort his daughter. It brings a hot blazing sting to his shoulder and the entirety of his arm with every bounce, but out of anything else, that seems to keep Morgan the calmest she could be considering the circumstances.

And, of course, the problem only becomes worse when they get ambushed by two Hydra guys from the side and Tony has to shoot down the both of them, propelling them backwards in an

awkward cartwheel before they could release their own rounds. And the two deafening cracks that followed it. It wasn't the loudest he's ever heard by any means, but it was just loud enough to make his worry even stronger when Morgan screamed hysterically in his arms. It spurred him to quicken his pace, hoping to whoever was listening that this was just an early sign of his potentially inherited drama-queen ways and there wasn't actually something wrong... though the small drops of blood spilling from her little ears wasn't exactly something that reassured him.

It seemed the cries helped in the end when they stumbled upon the blessing of Sam Wilson himself. Tony felt the tight air in his lungs release at the sight of the man dressed in Stark issued body armor and clutching a Stark rifle in his hands. And he looked just as happy to see them as they were to see him. He dropped his grip on the rifle at the sight of them hanging his head back as a manic laugh of relief escaped him.

"I knew that was a baby... Leave it to you Stark to go about rescuing yourself."

Tony chuckled, moving forward and pushing their Hydra prisoner out of the way to approach him.

"Well you took too damn long. Please tell me you aren't the only one here. Don't get me wrong this is great... but a one man rescue isn't exactly--"

"Don't worry. We got a whole team in here looking for you guys. This place is huge. At least five different entrances. Rhodes is leading a team down at the North entrance at the opposite end," he points behind Tony. "That's where all the heat signatures Vision spotted were, so there weren't many left to come with me and scout out around here."

"Vision?" Tony has plenty of questions, but he quickly interrupts his own curiosity and cuts Wilson off in his explanation before any more interest can grow. He's got some more important things to attend to. "We can talk about that later." By that time Harley had pushed Pepper up beside him and Tony hands Morgan down to her then looks back up at Sam. "Get these three to safety. I need to go find Peter. Don't call back the other teams, have them stay and search for Peter and knock out any other Hydra scum while they're at it..." he pauses for a second in thought, head bowed to his feet before looking back up again. "You got an extra comm on ya?"

Sam digs in one of the many pouches around his waist and eventually pulls out a small device. And as he drops it into Tony's open palm he's back at his belt pulling out a large revolver with a smirk as he offers it over as well. "Wanna BFR instead of that sorry ass thing." He nods at the Hydra gun, looking quite pitiful next to Tony's most recent revolver prototype. Tony eagerly takes it, finding a strange sense of protection with the weapon in his hand.

"Alright I'll be in touch. You get them to safety and have a medic check them out right away. You hear me?" He points a finger directly at Sam's face to make sure he gets the point. "If anything happens to them, I'm holding you responsible." Sam nods his head once respectively as Tony begins to slowly back away from them, legs already eager to spin around and run off in search of Peter. But he had to make *sure* they would be okay.

"Wait!" Harley shouts quickly, taking a stuttered step towards Tony and reaching his arm out. Tony pauses. "I'm coming with you--"

"*Absolutely* not." Tony is quick to shut down that line of thought real quick. "There's no way in hell that's happening."

Harley stands his ground, spine straight and mouth remaining in a firm line as he glares into Tony's soul. "You need someone to watch your back. You're weak..."

Tony's eyebrows shoot up in offense. "Excuse me?!"

Harley quickly catches himself. "No-no-no not like that! I mean look at you! You're tired and probably starved and dehydrated. You're-you're not at your best and the more hands on deck the better chance of you not killing yourself to get to Peter. I mean I know you got that whole glowing fire monster thing going on—" he waves his hands up beside his head, "— but I'm sure that can only do so much."

Tony still doesn't seem to be budging in his resolve. Harley glances to his mother, who seems more than out of it in her exhausted state, and then to Sam who's only watching with a small amused quirk to his lips.

"You know I'm right." Harley finishes. But he decides to throw just an extra little punch. "And I know you don't like the idea... but strategically speaking it's the best we got, right?"

"Harley," Tony's voice whines with a warning and Harley knows he's almost got him. "Remember Dad sometimes you have to have the strength to do what your gut knows is right even when you really don't want to listen to it."

Tony's eyes close and a hand lifts to his forehead as he sighs dejectedly... he should've known those words would come back to bite him in the ass one day. He didn't know that moment would be so soon though. He looks up at Harley, eyes narrowing as he tries to feel annoyance and anger in the way the boy was so quickly able to break down his resolve and use logic against him like some goddamn mastermind, but he was proud... and he couldn't keep the pride from bleeding through his smirk and the small quirk of his brows. He looks up at Sam... "how far is the exit? You think you can get them out of here by yourself without trouble."

Sam nods. "Yeah, man. Not a soul in sight the way I came. About a five minute walk. We'll be fine."

So Tony turns back to Harley with a sigh.

"Fine. But you stick close to me, alright? And you *listen*. If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to hide, you hide. No being the hero, got it?"

"Yes sir!"

"Alright, let's go." Tony grabs the Hydra man by his collar and pushes him back in the opposite direction and urges him into a quick pace.

As they walk, Tony turns back one last time to watch the other three disappear behind the bend. Wilson pushing Pepper forward in the chair with one arm, the other with the rifle propped up over her shoulder. And Tony turns back around with a small smile on his face as he activates his comm.

"Anyone here remember the tale of Lazarus?" His words are followed by an endless spiel of celebrated voices all filtering through, along with a sarcastic remark from JARVIS.

"Glad to see you didn't take the story literally, sir." And Tony chuckled.

"Wait," Rhodey interrupts, drawing out a lengthy, confused pause over the comms. "Is that JARVIS? When did he get turned back on?"

"Don't worry Honey-Bear. It's just a code word to counter the fail safe. Can't have VISION overexerting himself, now can we VISION?" He raises his voice like a parent scolding a child, knowing his words would be followed by silence. He knows what he did...

“I’m getting too old for this shit,” Rhodey grumbles. And that statement is followed by several hums of agreement by his other so-called friends.

“I concur,” Happy grumbled with a grunt and distinct sound of a gunshot following it.

“As do I,” Thor’s voice boomed clearly. “Though it has been a while since I’ve had fun like this. Isn’t that right brother?!”

“Thor and Loki...” Tony hums with a slight chuckle, “I didn’t think you guys would join the party.”

“Believe me Stark, we didn’t expect to either.”

Then there’s another voice that is all too familiar. “Believe me Tonio, the charm of those boys of yours have roused quite the army.”

Domencio...

“Yeah we’re just here for the little guys,” Clint retorts with a small cackle.

“Aren’t we all. Isn’t that right Captain Sprinkles?” Natasha’s teasing tone bled through and Tony’s mouth fell open and a surprised huff fell from his mouth. In the few months he’s known her she’d never been anything but terrifying and stoic. He never thought to expect a joke out of her.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just here to make sure Starks alive to get my job back—“

The quips back and forth seem they could go on for ages, but Domencio is interrupting once again with a question they’d yet to be bothered to ask and a worried tone.

“Are Pepper and the boys with you, Tonio?”

“Harley’s with me. Wilson’s getting Pepper out. We still gotta find Peter. Everyone be on the lookout for him. I got word they plan to...” Tony glances down at Harley and chooses his next few words carefully, “Let’s just say he’ll probably be wherever Richard is, near a large crowd of people.”

“Got it, we’ll keep an eye out.”

And just like that he shuts off the comms. “JARVIS, you got a scan of the compound?”

“Yes sir.”

“Alright you’re gonna help us find Peter.” As he speaks he glances down for only a moment at the thick barreled revolver in his hand. He lifts it just as the Hydra soldier in front of them turns around in startled realization and Tony pulls the trigger. He grabs Harley by the back of the neck and leads him forward, stepping over the limp form of the young man and guiding Harley’s startled gaze away from the corpse with a strong hand keeping his head facing straight on.

“Let’s go.”

Peter cowers, hands clasped over his head as his forehead pressed against his knees. Recoiling at the thundering footsteps hurrying by the shadowy corner obstructed by the mountain of grey metal boxes piled on top of each other like some high stakes game of tetris. It was the only place he could find to hide after only one short glance of a short man in a white coat... the kind of white coats he remembers his bad Daddy used to wear... he hadn’t noticed the pirate skulls and diamond of colors

until after he'd wedged himself behind them.

He *knows* that the bad men are looking for him. He *knows* . So with every set of footsteps he hears he presses closer to the wall and squeezes his eyes shut, puffing out his cheeks as he holds his breath, hoping they won't find him.

It isn't until he finally hears a familiar voice that a wave of relief flows over him. He was being saved! He was gonna get to go home.

"Did you see the kid run through here? The Boss will kill us if we lose him."

Peter scurries to pull himself out from his hiding spot, scrambling on his hands and knees to spring back to his feet and reach the source of the voice before the man leaves without him.

"Allen!" He called out, arms outstretched towards him.

Allen whips around, turning away from the man in the white coat he'd been speaking to, and eyes widening in shock. "Uhhh Peter... hey kid."

Peter collides into his legs, hugging him tight and pressing his face into his leg to hide from the scariness that's been following him for the past few weeks. For the first time since he was separated from his brother he felt like things might actually be okay.

Allen slowly bends down to pick him up, hands hooking beneath his armpits as he lifts Peter into a more comfortable position against his chest. Peter curls into him, hugging him tight around the neck as he cries.

"Allen I's so scared! I misst you!"

"Aww Pete," Allen gently pats his back, though it's a bit more awkward compared to their interactions from before. "I'm glad I found you." Peter can feel when Allen's head turns upwards as he addresses the man he'd been speaking to before. "I'm gonna... I'm gonna get him back to uh- - where he's supposed to be."

Peter can hear another voice cut off their own chuckle with an amused snort. "Good luck, greenhorn."

They start walking. They go a pretty long ways too. Peter doesn't know where to but he doesn't care. He's just happy to finally be going back home. He remembers that Allen had been with them when they left the Tower and got in the car. That was the last thing he remembered before waking up on the floor beside his brother. So, maybe Allen has been stuck here this whole time too and he was able to escape just like he was able to!

--"Allen?"

That was Tony's voice! Peter's head shoots up and he twists around in Allen's arms to come face to face with Tony and his brother standing right beside him, looking really angry. He's just on the verge of crying out their names and stretching his arms out towards them, but he notices something eerily familiar clutched in Allen's outstretched hand beside him. It's shiny and grey and oh so familiar.

It's what his bad daddy had used to kill his mama all that time ago. It looked different from the ones he'd seen Tony hold on occasion... this one looked exactly the same... and it was pointed right at Tony... his Daddy. His hand was shaking, and Peter turned his head up to look at his face with a quickly expanding worry. Allen looks scared...

“S-sir--um.” He doesn’t lower the gun though.

Tony steps closer to them, eyes narrowing. And Peter notices his one eye starts to look a bit weird. Shiny and bright in a way Peter had never seen anyone’s eye look like.

“What is that you're wearing?” Tony spits out with a growl, taking another step forward just as Allen takes a startled step back. “That Hydra garb?” His head stutters up and down once in a terse nod towards the dark uniformed clothes Allen is wearing.

“S-sir I-I can explain.”

Tony’s eye sparkles like a mini explosion as he growls, and Peter can see little tingles of orange fairy lights trailing down his neck. “You can start after getting that fucking gun out of my face and putting my son down.”

“I-I can’t do that, sir.” And Tony steps forward one more time, this time with much more threat, and a sharp crack follows it. Peter slams his hands over his ears and squeezes his eyes closed before remembering what that loud crack actually meant--

“DADDY!” He cries out, forcing his eyes open and sobbing at the sight of the teared skin of his Dad’s shoulder and dark red blood pours from the wound. But Tony didn’t even bother glancing down at it, he barely seemed fazed except for the couple feet the force had sent him stumbling back.

Peter couldn’t even see through the tears as he sobbed. He missed the miraculous sight of those shiny threads of fairy lights dancing across his dad’s skin until it encircled the wound and gently stitched the opening closed like it’d never existed in the first place.

Tony cocks his head to the side as hoarse words escaped from between his lips. “Sometimes the person you would’ve taken a bullet for is the one behind the trigger.” He doesn’t look at all upset as he quotes the words-- “You know who said that?”

Allen continues stepping backwards, never lowering the gun and even releasing another shot which only causes Peter to scream louder. This one does even less damage than the last. Tony’s skin was engulfed in an orange glow, like he inhabited the power of an entire star within him.

“--Taylor Swift... turns out she was right. Guess I underestimated her.”

Allen chokes on startled words, shocking that the man has this ability to speak so casually and cause such fear to encumber him.

“You know what else she was right about?”

Suddenly Allen’s grip on the gun falls away as Tony’s large hand takes hold of his wrist, squeezing and twisting until there was a loud snap, the other hand lifts to encircle around his neck and press him into the wall behind them, taking extra care not to touch Peter to avoid burning him.

“There’s nothing I do better than revenge,” he quotes, and his frown morphs into a wicked smile as he sneers down at Allen. It’s sickeningly wide and his one eye gleams with a twisted sense of joy. “Let the boy go. He doesn’t need to see this”

Allen chokes around the vice grip around his throat and barely has the strength to fight against Harley pulling Peter into his arms. And Tony doesn’t move his head either way as he addresses them.

“Boys... go wait around the corner while I take care of this turncoat.”

Harley listens, thank goodness, and works at consoling his little brother with soft words and a strong hug as he disappears around the corner.

Tony releases his grip around Allen’s throat but keeps him pressed against the wall. He can see the sizzling imprint of his hand circled around the young man’s throat. The skin was bright red and irritated, scorched around the traced edges of his palm and thumb.

“I thought they were lying,” Allen chokes out with a hoarse voice. “You-you really are alive... on fire too.”

“I’m not really in the mood for small talk, kid.” Tony’s body presses so close the heat almost burns Allen right through the thick body armor he’s wearing. “I’d rather we talk so you can fully understand what you’ve done.”

Again, one hand lifts to circle around his throat, but he doesn’t squeeze, allowing Allen’s cries of pain to filter through his mouth. The other hand lifts to clutch his jaw, forcing their gazes to lock.

“You’re a coward. You’ve broken the vow and you will pay the price...” Tony squeezes his jaw, applying just enough force to hear a sharp crack as his jaw gives way under his monstrous strength.

Tony narrows his eyes at him, studying him. “You were going to take Peter to them weren’t you? So they could kill him.”

Allen frantically tries to shake his head in denial, but Tony’s grip kept his head firmly in place.

“Don’t lie to me!” He squeezes harder. “I’m already going to kill you, no need to make it more painful than it has to be, understand? Now answer the question!”

Allen hesitates, but then he pushes downwards with his chin and Tony knows that signifies a nod. And with that Tony moves his hand from his jaw to the cheap metal wrapped around his chest and he channels his anger through that hand, a heat that could apparently melt the cheap fabric lined iron garb. It glows yellow, then orange, and soon the molten metal is giving way to the merciless heat leaking from his palm and Tony can feel the vibrations and pulsing of Allen’s throat as he traps his sharp screams within the man’s throat with a heavy squeeze.

He releases his hold to hear him scream, but it takes a strong effort to hold him in place when he begins thrashing when Tony only pressed his hand down firmly against his now exposed torso. Tony watches as the materials of his clothes burn away and soon his palm rests on bare skin and he feels the fumes of his excitement and glee only feed the raging fire emitting from his palm. He can imagine the sound as the skin sizzles away, but nothing could be heard over the young man’s pained wails. He could smell the putrid stench of burnt flesh though. Which was kind of a nice substitute.

He pulls his hands away and he’s not exactly sure what it is he’s looking at. Charred skin melted and mixed with his insides, or maybe *just* his insides. Either way the sharp inch indent of his hand was obvious, and thrillingly satisfying.

Tony looked back up at him. Then he steps away, allowing the man to collapse on the floor in a heap, body writhing in pain like he was in the midst of a seizure. Then he looks down at his glowing palm, willing the heat to once again evenly disperse across the expanse of his skin and he can *feel* as the heat expands across him once more... oh the power he harnessed in these very

hands... it was a power no man should be worthy of having. It was corrupting...

And he's sure glad he's the one who has it.

He lowers himself into a low squat beside him, and he starts to speak again.

"You're the one who planted those bugs, aren't you?" Allen nods, curling away from him to protect the injury as tears streamed down his face.

"Yes sir," he choked, "i'm sorry... i'm so-so sorry! They made me do it!"

"No one can make you do anything unless you allow them to." Tony sneers, grabbing his shoulder and yanking him onto his back so he can leer down at him. He moves to press a single knee against his collar, pressing his weight down.

"Do you realize exactly what you did? You not only betrayed me and my family... but you had the audacity to push the blame onto an innocent young boy... my son." Tony's chin quivered in anger and he pressed his lips together firmly. He felt his eyes burn with tears but the heat of his face and his eye quickly dried them before they could fall. "You made me doubt my *son*. You stood there, ready to let me--" he cuts himself off, remembering the moment all too well... the one moment where he was genuinely inflicted with the urge to hurt his child.... To make him feel pain. He would've killed him... if it were true he probably would have. And out of everything else that had transpired because of those few minutes, that feeling and those thoughts inside of him is what haunts him the most to this day.

"You are a disgrace to everything I stand for. You held no mercy for my family, so nothing you can say will have me spare any mercy onto your soul. Maybe God will... but *I* will not."

And with those words his hands dart forward to latch onto either side of Allen's head, and he squeezes, pushing down on the points of his cheekbones with his thumbs, an angry roar spilling front his own mouth. Allen thrashes frantically beneath him as he screams, arms and hands scraping across Tony's own arms in an effort to save himself from the pain, but it does nothing more than scorch his skin against the blazing heat pouring enormous strength into his limbs.

It takes only a minute. It finishes with either of Tony's thumbs in his eyes as his skull caves in. The knee he holds on his chest presses down with one final push, forming a gnarly cavity in his chest.

And all goes quiet except for the sharp ringing in his ears.

He stands, hands coated in blood as the heat burns it all away before his eye. And the usual orange tint of anger coloring his vision is red, and not in a figurative sense, as he looks down at the mess he created of the man. And he found a sickening joy upon looking down at him.

The surge leaves him in one fail swoop and he nearly collapses with the loss of energy. His eyes droop and his muscles cramp with the sudden influx of strain to remain upright. Exhaustion creeps in and he has just enough time to stumble around the corner before his legs give out and he collapses against the wall near his boys.

Everything was okay... everyone was alright... his family is *safe* .

"C'mere," he murmurs through his exhaustion, holding out his arm and curling his fingers towards himself. Harley rushes to his side, clearly worried that something was wrong. But Tony only wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him closer until he was squeezing both his boys tight, Peter sandwiched between them both.

“Is everyone okay?” He whispers quietly, muffled by his face pressed into Peter’s hair.

He feels two distinct nods from both their heads.

Harley’s arms unwind from around Peter now that Tony was there to hold them both upright, and he wraps them tightly around Tony’s torso, hiding his face between the crevice of his dad’s shoulder and neck. So, Tony takes Peter into his other arm and holds him close, tears pouring from his eyes as he relishes in the moment. He wished Pepper and Morgan were there so he could hold them all at once and have the assurance that each of them were safe in his arms.

“Peter, Mimmo,” he whispers quietly, “I’m so sorry.”

Peter just curls up tighter against him, still coming down from his panic from earlier.

“Not one of those things I said to you before were true. Do you understand? None of it. I love you so much, okay?”

He feels the warmth of Peter’s tears drop onto his chest, but the boy still says nothing. His body tremors instead.

But Harley does look up at him, at his words. “W-what?”

Tony looks at him. “They threatened to hurt you if I didn’t lie to Peter.” He looks back down at his little boy and hugs him close before whispering again. “None of it was true Peter. I never want you to think I don’t love you.”

He feels the small nod against his chest and finally-- finally-- he lifts his head to look him in the eye, tears fall down his cheeks in streams and Tony’s smile quivers as it slowly splits his face in two. “I love you faster than the speed of light, kid.”

Peter stares at him, awe in his eyes and slowly a wide smile grows across his face too before he collapses like a dead weight against Tony’s chest again, this time hugging him with all his strength.

“That’s so in’possible Daddy.”

Tony chuckles to disguise his relieved sob. “I thought it was impossible to Bubba, but here we are.” He lifts one arm and pulls Harley close again, holding them both to his body as they sit there on the floor. “You kids make me do the impossible.”

“Do you know how much *I* love *you* ?” Peter whispers softly, barely a mumble. He apparently wasn’t waiting for an answer because he continues before Tony can respond. “I love you past da moon, an’ stars, an’ planets, an’ sun, and wrapped ‘round everythin’ times, like, twenty million bajillion plus infinity!” Peter leans away again, throwing his arms up in exclamation, “I love you that much. You an’ Mama, an’ Ha’ley, an’ -an; MooMoo.” Peter looks over at Harley and smiles shyly before dropping against his father’s chest once more, lifting his hand to push two fingers into his mouth.

“Wow,” Tony breathes with a laugh, “I don’t think I can even count that high.”

“Yeah,” Peter nods, “so it’s even more in’pssoble than yours.”

“Well,” Tony muses, “mathematically speaking... I don’t know about that.”

“Oh my god I can’t take this anymore, we got it. You’re both big marshmallows of fluff,” Harley groans, “let’s just get out of here so--” He coughs violently, hacking uncontrollably into his hand,

bending at the waist.

Tony sits up, at attention, a hand hovering over the kid's back while wearing a worried crease between his brows. "You okay, kiddo?"

Harley stops coughing, holding his hand against his mouth for a moment as he catches his breath. Then he drops it and Tony catches a glimpse of the blood painted across the boy's palm, stirring a new batch of panic in him.

He grabs Harley's bicep urgently. "Kid, tell me the truth. Has that been happening since you got here?" He nods down at the blood in his hand and Harley glances down at it.

"Yeah it hurts sometimes," he looks up at Tony, eyes wide, "is that bad?"

"No," Tony lies, adjusting Peter in his hold to sit up straighter and fish something from his pocket. "But I'm gonna need you to stick your hand down your throat in a second--"

"What?!"

"They put an implant in your throat. They can shock you, or track you, or whatever the hell they want to. We need to get it out, especially before we get out of here."

"I-I-I can't just--"

"Can you make yourself vomit instead?" He suggests at seeing the panicked look on the kid's face. "When I release it, that thing can't go further down into your stomach. It needs to come *out*."

"He's gotta throwed up?" Peter crinkles his nose in disgust and sticks out his tongue. "Yucky."

"Well those are the options," he gives Harley a look, "take your pick."

The kid does not look enthused.

"Ugh! Fine. Tell me when."

"Whatever you do, don't swallow," Tony instructs, looking down at the small device in his hand, making sure he presses the right button this time. He hopes it works... "Alright... now."

He presses down on the button just as Harley pushes his fingers against the back of his throat. Tony can hear a slight bzt! And Harley chokes as a minor tremor runs through him, but soon he's heaving onto the ground a few feet away from where Tony and Peter are sitting. Peter's face is hiding against Tony's shoulder, hands over his ears, and Tony reaches out to place a comforting hand on his other kid's back, wincing ever so slightly with every retch.

Nothing comes up except for a small trickle of saliva and bile as the kid dry heaves a couple times, but then he chokes roughly, coughing into the last heave and Tony hears a small, metallic clatter against the metal floor.

Harley whines as he finishes, falling back onto his rump and crawling back towards them, tucking himself under Tony's arm for comfort.

"Good boy," Tony praises with a small chuckle, releasing a pained, but relieved breath over dodging that particular bullet. Who's to know what could've happened if they got out of here while Harley still had that device lodged inside of him. He pats the kid on the back then combs through his sweaty hair as he catches his breath.

“Can we get out of here now?” Harley whines softly into his shoulder.

Tony smirks and nods his head, but he doesn’t put an effort into standing up... he doesn’t think he can actually. He’s surprised he’s even still, awake. Adrenaline had been fueling him since the beginning and now it’s gone and all he can feel is a big bubble of pain encompassing his whole body. His entire body felt hot with fatigue, yet he was *freezing*. His left arm had long since gone numb, which was probably a good thing for him... but judging by the purpling color starting to accompany the small blotches etched into his clammy skin... Maybe not so good in the long run.

He’s guessing his recovery this time around is going to be anything but pleasant.

Yet, he reaches his hand up to press against the comm in his ear and he speaks.

“JARVIS, give the nearest group our location, and if I fall asleep... wake me up if any heat signatures that don’t belong to our men start to approach, yeah?”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony hesitates, needing to know one last thing before he can peacefully drift off. “Did Wilson get my girls out safe?”

“Yes sir,” JARVIS says in what almost sounds like a whisper. “They’re both being checked out by doctors as we speak.”

Tony sighs and closes his eyes, head falling back against the cool metal wall behind him. “Okay good.”

And he drifts in and out with the sight of Harley perched close by, on alert, the revolver Tony got from Sam in his hands, and Peter curled up comfortably against his chest. All was okay. Though he doesn’t let himself fully drift off until a familiar voice is yelling at him, a firm grip on his shoulders pulling him into a tight, aggressive hug, and he smiles.

“Don’t die on me, Stark.”

Tony grins, and he thinks he probably looks a little delirious when he does it but who can blame it. “I find your lack of faith a bit disturbing, Rhodes.” And just like that he lets the longing pull of exhaustion finally take its hold and his head dips as his body goes limp in his best friend's arms.

Rhodey doesn’t leave his side. Not once. He’s even the one that breaks his back carrying the damn stubborn man out of this hellhole. Peter does a bit of screaming and crying on the way back, thinking Tony had died, and no amount of reassurances could quell his cries, despite everyone’s best efforts.

They get Tony and the boys out as Happy and Steve’s team does one final sweep for any remaining Hydra goons who hadn’t already evacuated the base. Rhodey had been hoping to give that Allen traitor a piece of his mind for stabbing them in the back, but from what Harley told him, that deformed corpse they’d found was Tony’s good doing... and... well that rose a lot of questions which Rhodey pushed to the back of his mind for later.

He personally brought Tony and the boys to one of Tony’s safehouses outside of the city. Wilson and Coulson were supposed to be driving Pepper and Morgan out to meet them as soon as Morgan was cleared by the doctor... turns out the girls beat them and were already being checked over by Bruce ‘just as a precaution’ to appease the man’s paranoia.

And to say Rhodey was smitten as soon as he saw Morgan, would be a complete understatement. When Pepper let him hold her, he never wanted to let go even when Peter started whining for his turn to hold his baby sister after his checkup with Bruce's trusted nurses. The doctor had locked himself away in the ensuite medical room to work on Tony and he refused to announce the seriousness of Tony's injuries until after he was done.

It took longer than anyone would have liked. Pepper and the boys were stressed, but Pepper was so happy to see Peter and vice versa. Harley spent quite a bit of time with the nurse, getting his wounds dressed and a pretty nasty burn across his back treated. But in the end, all was well with the four Stark's, and it didn't take much convincing on Rhodey's part to get them cuddled up on the couch and watching a feel good Pixar movie.

He held Morgan of course...

Happy showed up with Dom a few hours later, once Peter and Harley had both passed out from exhaustion, the old man cried and cried as he hugged Pepper and the sleeping boys before outright demanding to hold the baby.

Happy didn't even get a turn.

It wasn't until well into the morning, and everyone but Rhodey and Happy had long since fallen asleep that Bruce came trudging out of the exam room with a grim frown on his face. Rhodey rushed up to him, eyes narrowing and heart beating rapidly at the anticipation. Tony can't die now... he wouldn't have it. He was in bad shape when he picked him up, probably the worst Rhodey's ever seen, but Tony was a stubborn son of a bitch. And it astounded him that the man in his state had been capable of the feats of strength displayed by the havoc he'd written on the numerous bodies of Hydra soldiers they'd come across. But he's heard the stories of mother's lifting cars to save their children... he supposes this wasn't much different.

"He's..." Bruce starts, eyes falling to his feet, "he's stable... for now."

"What's wrong?" Rhodey whispers. He doesn't want to wake Pepper and the boys. They needed sleep. As much as they could get.

"I-I-I had to... Well... it's a lot. And some of it I can't even begin to wrap my own mind around."

Tony wakes up and his whole body *hurts* . Like fucking hell it hurts bad.

A low growl builds up from his throat just before he speaks, "what the hell?"

"Tony!"

He knows that voice.

"Mom! Bruce! Dad's awake!"

He can't open his eyes yet for some reason... and it's not the worst thing in the world, but it's aggravating at the least. And then he feels hands on him, on his face, on his shoulder, along his chest. Everyone's touching him and his body stings with every scrape of skin against his own, like their hands were made of sandpaper.

"Tony, I'm gonna need you to open your eye." That was Bruce. Ever so bossy, this guy was.

"What if I don't want to Banner?" He snarks with a frustrated huff, turning his head away from the

prodding hands along his face.

“Then I’ll pry it open myself, Stark. Now open your eyes.”

Tony squints open his one eye, casting a glare at the doctor. “You do mean eye, correct? Because as lovely as it would be, I’m fairly certain the other one won’t be growing back anytime soon.”

“My mistake,” Bruce replies without a semblance of remorse, and then immediately goes about shining a light in his face. Tony lifts up his arm to push the man away, but nothing happens. He grunts and tries again, but it seems his left arm is completely numb and dead to the world. *Great*.

“Alright good; you can see.”

“No shit I can see,” Tony growls, trying and failing again to push the doctor away from him yet again. He’d just like a couple minutes of peace before he’s assaulted by all of Bruce’s medical jargon, maybe a chance to hug his kids and wife first. His frustration seems to take hold of him and he has no restraint or control over it.

“Tony, honey, you need to calm down, okay?”

That was Pepper. Her voice sounded worried. Why was she worried? Was something wrong?

“Tony you can’t get yourself worked up, do you understand me?” Bruce again. He decides that Bruce is officially on his shit list right now. “When your heart rate gets too high there is an increased release of neurotransmitters, and your body responds very aggressively against it now, okay? You can’t lose control while you’re still healing. It puts too much of a strain on your body.”

“The hell you talkin’ ‘bout Banner,” Tony mumbles, feeling the sudden surge of exhaustion hit him.

“I’m guessing you remember your new little party trick. Harley told us all about it.”

“Oh,” Tony grunts, “That. Figure that one out yet? I’m still workin’ on it.”

“Actually, yes,” and finally--finally Bruce gives him some space and paces at the foot of his bed, then points his finger at Tony with a sharp glare. “And by the way, just so we’re clear, when you’re out of this bed we’re going to have a long talk about injecting foreign drugs that have never been tested into your bloodstream without your doctor’s approval.” Tony avoids his eyes like a child who got caught stealing cookies, and Bruce continues, “but in the end that is what saved your life, so I might let this one slide. Your cellular enhancing formula bonded with whatever it was that Parker gave you. You seemed to have figured out the missing piece to Extremis, because, well, you haven’t exploded yet which is a good sign. And as long as you learn to keep it in check, you can work past this. It’s not as potent as AIM’s original design. We can look a bit more into together when you’re feeling better, but in the meantime you need to rest and stay calm. And maybe practice a bit of meditation.”

“Alright, I can do that... as long as nobody pisses me off,” then he glances around the room, just now noticing it’s the master bedroom of one of his many safehouses. Pepper’s sitting beside him, but there are no kids in sight. “Where are my kids, I wanna see them.”

“Not yet, Tony. There’s still a few more things we need to discuss.”

“I want to see my kids,” he reiterates with a bite.

“And I said *not yet*,” Bruce responds just as fervently. “This is important Tony. And your kids

don't need to be in here when you... when you find out-- okay, remember what I said, you need to stay calm, okay?"

He feels Pepper squeeze his right hand.

"I had you in surgery for six hours Tony. You were pretty beat up. You had a total of probably 12 bullets molded into your muscles, and bones. A couple in your organs. You're body healed around them, and some had even melted down into your bloodstream a bit. It was... it was a lot... And I tried, but I-I couldn't save your arm." Tony's brows furrowed in startled confusion, and as he looked down to his left and at the missing limb that should be protruding from his left sleeve Bruce rambled in a way he's never heard Bruce ramble before, "by the time I had you under and the antibiotics going, the infection had completely eaten away the inside of your arm. There-there was no open wound and it was a weird enhanced bacteria I've-I've never come across before and there was no severe external damage until I opened up your shoulder to dislodge one of the bullets sowed in and-and by then half your arm was rotted out. I-I had to act quick and-and I'm still monitoring you to make sure the infection doesn't condense in one spot again but I think the antibiotics are helping--"

--Bruce, it's okay," Tony actually chuckled. "I'm honestly surprised I've made it this far in my life with all my limbs still intact. And if I'm honest, that one was my least favorite," he nods down at the empty space on his sheets. "You did good."

He felt his wife squeeze his hand. "You're taking this surprisingly well, Hon. I expected a bit more drama."

Tony smiled at her. "At this point, I'm just glad I got out of there with at least one eye so I can still look at your beautiful face," he smirks as he shamelessly flirts with her. She smiles at him and praises him with a short kiss to his lips. God... he missed her so much. "And besides, this just means we'll have to open up a new department in SI for advanced prosthetics. I'm sure I can have a couple prototypes drawn up in a couple months. Harley and Pete will have a ball helping me design it... " he looks over at Bruce. "Speaking of... *Now* can I see my kids?"

Bruce smiles, a genuine smile, and Tony makes a note to take him off his shit list for now. And then he opens the bedroom door and calls them in, stopping Peter with a hand on his chest when the boy bounds up to the threshold.

"Remember what I said, Peter. You have to be gentle with your Dad right now, okay?"

Peter nods his head fervently. "Yes Brucie, I 'member."

And soon Tony has Peter in his arms, or, well... arm.

"Oh, mimmo, I missed you so much," He cooes, holding Peter's head against his neck and kisses his hair tenderly.

"Misst you too. You 'kay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay Buddy."

Then Rhodey is at his bedside with a yellow bundle in his arms, then pats the couple feet of space on Tony's left side. "Hey, Petey, move over to this side of Dad, yeah? I think your little sister wants to see her Daddy."

Tony feels his eyes tear up instantly, like a snap of the finger, as an abundant wave of emotion flows over him. And Rhodey gently leans over Peter to settle the small bundle in the crook of his

right arm. Tony looks down at her, admiring the soft curls covering her head, and her tiny pink features. He was absolutely smitten. His baby girl...

"Hey beautiful," he whispers, not caring that he has witnesses to his tears right now, "you're gonna be a little heartbreaker just like your Mama aren't you?" He grins when he feels his wife's light pinch on his thigh, and then he feels her chin prop up against his shoulder as she looks down on the bundle as well.

"Y'know I think she's even cuter when she's not screaming," He says, and he's hit with rekindled worry from before as he remembers the moment he'd held his daughter for the first time and the terrifying panic that swept over him when he saw the blood dribbling down from her tiny ears. His head snaps up to Bruce, then to Pepper. "Is she okay? I-I... when--" he cuts himself off when he sees the sad look on Pepper's face. She lifts her hand to stroke from his shoulder down his bicep and then back up to rest her chin on her knuckles as she spoke.

"She um... her eardrums ruptured. There's... there's a good chance she might be deaf, but we don't know how bad it is yet." Tony looks down at the baby in his arms, new tears pricking at his eyes. This time out of anger and self loathing than the overwhelming joy.

"I'm sorry Pepper," he whispers, lifting his head once more to press their foreheads together. "I-I should've come sooner. I should've been there and none of this would've happened. I-I should've just let you three stay in Italy like you wanted... I-- I'm sorry."

"Shhhh," Pepper shushed quietly, kissing his cheek, "none of that. None of this is your fault."

"Yeah!" Peter pipes up quickly, a stern frown on his face, "none of it!" And then the kid falls against his side gently and squeezes his arms around his waist tight.

Tony wishes he could hug him back.

Then Pepper's hand is nudging his elbow up a little bit. "Hold her against your chest, and hum... she likes the vibrations and she might open her eyes for you."

Tony does as she says, and props Morgan up a bit closer to his chest as he racks his mind for a song to hum. He settles with a small tune that used to get stuck in his head while Pepper was still pregnant. And sure enough after a few moments, he felt Morgan shift a bit in her swaddle. Her nose scrunched up adorably as she grunted in acknowledgement and for a second Tony thought she was going to burst into tears, but then her face relaxed and her mouth opened in a wide yawn before her big eyes slowly blinked open. Big blue eyes. She looked to be staring right at him

Tony grinned. "She's got your eyes Pepper!"

Pepper rubs his arm. "For now she does. Most babies have blue eyes when they're born, but I've got a feeling she'll be taking after you in most things."

"What?" Tony scoffs. "No way."

"Look at that face, dear," Pepper placates, "That is a Stark face right there."

"I gotta agree with her on this one Tones. That's all you right there. I do hope she takes after Pepper when it comes to personality though. I already have three Stark boys to chase around, I don't need to add another gremlin to the bunch."

"I agree." Pepper laughs. "And even with Morgan I'm still outnumbered--"

Tony's quick to offer a solution. "That just means we'll have to make another one."

Pepper is quick to nip that one in the bud real quick with a simple "no. We've got three. That's plenty."

"Speaking of three. Where is the first one," Tony cranes his head to search the room only to find Halrey shuffling awkwardly at the right of the bed, huddling in the corner it seemed. "What are you doin' over there kid? I've not got my hug from you yet."

Harley smiles awkwardly and shuffles some more. "Well you've got one arm and there's three kids here... not a real even match."

"So?" Tony scoffs. "There's two parents here, and if my math is right, which, y'know it always is, that means there's three arms in total. Now get in here and stop trying to act all tough." Pepper scoots over and Tony nods down at the now empty space between them.

Harley clambers in next to them, sandwiching himself between his parents and he looks down at Morgan, lifting a finger to gently tap her on the nose. He smiles.

"Wait!" Peter exclaims, scrambling across Tony's legs and settling himself on Harley's lap so he can lean up against Tony's arm. He reaches out and grabs Pepper's arm, bringing it around his waist so she's hugging both Harley and Peter against her as well. "Better."

It's an adorable sight and Tony turns his head to find Rhodey grinning like the dipshit he is.

"Don't think I had time to say it before," Tony addresses him slowly, "but thanks for the save Platypus."

"Anytime, Tones." Rhodey smiles back, clapping him gently on his left shoulder. "Now are you up to some company? You've got some worried folks out in the living room who've been dying to see ya."

"Why not?" He chuckles. He might as well.

Soon the room was full and he received a slew of varying exclamations voicing their relief that he didn't die.

Dom hugged him tight, and so did Thor. The others just settled for a smile and gentle shoulder claps. He was happy he got to see everyone and express his thanks for helping get his family to safety.

After an hour though Bruce came in with a stern frown. Telling everyone who wasn't his wife or children to get the hell out so he could get some rest. They listened, albeit a bit grudgingly, but both Rhodey and Dom assured him they'd be back every day to check on them and discuss what he had missed in his absence.

When everyone left Bruce offered to turn on a movie for them and Peter eagerly insisted on picking as the family slowly rearranged themselves to get more comfy. They stayed like that the whole night, Tony's pretty sure. He doesn't know for sure but he likes to think they did. He drifts off within the first ten minutes of the movie with a smile on his face, knowing that everything was more than okay.

"How did this happen?" The man muttered with a scowl, watching the tapes of Anthony plowing his way through his soldiers featuring such an absurd amount of strength.

"I couldn't tell ya sir," Ben answered.

"He was not supposed to get out with those children." The man stomped off angrily and Ben jumped to follow him. "I want Barnes ready by the end of the week. His conditioning needs to begin soon. Did your brother finish his tasks?"

"The more important ones, yes," Ben answered.

"Bring me to him."

Ben led him down the maze of halls and stopped outside of a room, gesturing to the door beside him.

The man walks in by himself and approaches Parker hanging from the ceiling by his arms. He looks up at the loud sound of the heavy door slamming shut behind him. The man decides it best to get straight to the point. He'd never been one for chit-chat.

"You disobeyed my direct orders Mr. Parker."

Parker stared at him with wide eyes. "Your-you're... I was right... it is you. I knew you weren't dead!"

The man frowned, arms crossed over his chest.

"I knew it was you. It explains everything," Richard continues to ramble, a manic laugh blowing past his lips before he's shut up by a large, wrinkled hand wrapped around his throat.

"Shut up," he growled.

Parker gulped heavily. "S-sorry, sir."

His lips twisted up in a dark sneer, one Parker had grown too familiar with during his time with Tony Stark.

"I told you I needed Anthony alive, and what did you do?"

Parker croaked, unable to form a word under the pressure around his throat.

"Not only disobey my orders... by trying to kill him... you tried killing my *son*. Do you understand how disrespectful that is to a man like me. Daring to destroy my decades of hard work; my own blood? My heir? I hope you understand that I can't let that go unpunished. It would set a bad precedent considering I've killed men much dearer to my heart for this very thing."

He releases Parker and takes several steps back, glancing down to remove an old revolver from his holster.

"S-sir! I was not in the right state of mind! You can understand! He stole my son! He-he took him from me!"

"And I gave you the opportunity to have him back, but you decided not to take it. I hope it was worth it Mr. Parker."

He lifts his gun, aimed at the center of his skull and pulls the trigger. He feels no tinge of regret or sorrow and he turns around and walks out the door.

He addresses Ben outside.

“Dispose of his body if you would. And have President Ross give me a call. We need to set up a meeting to discuss some things.”

Ben nods his head. “Yes sir.”

“Oh, and Benjamin?”

Ben turns back to him. “Yes, Mr. Stark?”

Howard only smiles at him, a proud glint in his eyes. “You did good.”

“Thank you sir.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading lovelies! I'm sorry this took forever... but was anyone actually expecting me to be able to stick to a decent update schedule lol! Lemme know what you thought! We got one more chapter to go everybody! We can do this! And then we gotta start this whole process over with the sequel (oh boy). Anyways! Thanks for reading.

XOXOXO

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

It is the long awaited day my friends... it is the end of our story. I have enjoyed our time together and I have and do appreciate your patience and dedication to this fic. I've worked my ass off the past two years writing it and I wouldn't have been able to do it without any of you.

So, I am very proud to announce today on this fics two year anniversary, I give you all the last chapter of this long. Ass. Fic. I never expected it to be this deep and intricate when I started it, but here we are... and there's only more to come.

Also, quick shoutout to my dear friend, and confidant in everything that has to do with this fic and probably anything else I write in the future... jwriter819. You can thank them you even have the past 10 chapters of this. She nagged me till I couldn't take it anymore and I believe that was her goal XD lol -- love you J ☺

Anyways, now that all that ooey gooey-ness is over with time for the other A/N.

Just FYI to anyone reading this at late time of night or with the expectation that you will be able to read this within a few minutes... apparently you must have forgotten the previous few chapters... as well as my inability to keep things brief. Well I am here to tell you, now is NOT the time to be reading this chapter if you need to wake up in the morning. It is the longest chapter yet (21k) and I refused to split it into two chapters because I refuse to have any of my fics end on an odd number, especially if the chapter previous was such a perfectly even number. Blegh! So if you do not have the self control to stop at an appropriate time in the middle of the chapter (which I doubt most of you do, myself included) this is your warning...

Anyways! There is mention of Peter getting sick so, if you don't like that, tread lightly. Also... just a lot of fluff, plus a lot of random stuff in an attempt to fill any plothes I may have left behind... so yeah. That's about it.

Have fun reading! I love you all!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Alright Honey, I’m going to be gone for a couple hours, okay?” Pepper comes shuffling down the hallway in a pair of clacking shoes and a stylish wrapped skirt. Harley’s head swivels away from the TV to stare at her, a sudden panic taking over him at her words.

“Where are you going?” His spine erects, fingers tightening their grip around the remote he holds in his hand. He watches as she dashes through the kitchen with her usual confident stride.

“I’m just going to the Tower for a little while. I need to meet with some people, and Rhodey needs some help getting a few things situated while I’m there.” She grabs her purse from the armchair adjacent to the couch and finally turns to face him, giving her full attention. An affectionate smile spreads over her face, relieving Harley of some of his worry. “I just put Morgan down for her nap. She’ll probably need a bottle when she wakes up. There are a couple bottles in the fridge.” She

glances down at her watch with an exasperated sigh as she continues. “And Dad finally went down for his nap too after I coaxed that damned tablet away from him. Peter’s up watching a movie in our bed beside him, so he should be conked out pretty quickly also. So,” she smiles, “so that means you’ll have the place to yourself for a little while.”

Harley doesn’t exactly look enthusiastic about that.

“Do you *have* to go?”

She looks down at Harley and sighs. She sits down beside him on the couch and pulls him into a tight hug.

“I’ll be back soon, okay? Zio Dom is supposed to be coming in for dinner after he picks up Zia at the airport. So I have to be back before then. It won’t be very long, I promise. Three hours at the very max.”

“Maybe I should come with you.” Harley pulls away from the hug and raises a serious brow. “Y’know... just in case something happens...”

Pepper’s smile morphs into an amused smirk. “I promise you sweetheart, I can handle myself just fine.” She stands from the couch and pulls her purse over her shoulder. “Now, if your father wakes up make sure he takes his pills right after. He refused to take them this morning at breakfast and he’s not going to want to take them after his nap either, but I give you permission to slip them into his applesauce if he gives you shit. Just make sure he doesn’t end up sharing with Peter. It’ll make him a little loopy and goofy for a while, so I’m leaving you in charge, okay? Don’t let him leave that bed. Think you’re up to holding down the fort while I’m gone?”

Harley squints at her suspiciously. “Is Dad okay with you leaving?”

“It’s not up to Dad,” Pepper retorts with a smile, pressing a swift kiss to his forehead. “He’s stuck in that bed for a month on strict orders; someone needs to get on top of things before it all goes to hell and Uncle Jimmy has a stroke.”

Harley glances at the TV, then back to his mother.

“Ok, fine... but um... do you think you can call me when you get there?”

“Of course.”

And Harley doesn’t necessarily feel *good* about it, but he waves goodbye to his mother as she leaves and goes back to his mindless scrolling through the catalogue of movies on the screen. JARVIS filtered out all the good movies, which was stupid. He wasn’t a *child*, he could watch mature movies. Hell, not even *The Godfather*... out of everything, he’d think Tony’d make an exception for that masterpiece.

“JARVIS,” Harley whines after an hour of scrolling with no luck. “Is there anyway to lift the stupid parental restrictions?”

“I’m afraid there isn’t Master Harley, but there are a few mature films that your father has approved as appropriate for you to watch.”

Harley grumbles and continues his scrolling. Soon he gets lonely and a looming sense of anxiety settles over him when he glances around the room to find nothing but an empty, quiet home void of any life besides his. He shudders, and his fingers twitch as he forces himself to try and concentrate on the neverending list of movies on the screen. It doesn’t last. He could only remain distracted for

so long, so he decides maybe he should go see if Peter's still up and doing alright. His brother may be just as perturbed by the silence as he is, and it'd be best to check to make sure. So he creeps down the hall and cracks open the door leading to his parents room.

Tony's lying on his back, mouth hanging open as he snored. Peter didn't look all that awake. He was spread out on his stomach beside Tony, face pressed into the man's armpit and right arm draped over his chest.

"Pete?" Harley whispers, peeking his head through the doorway.

At the sound of his name, Peter's head perks up like a hyper puppy, wild hair standing on end and curling over his forehead and eyes. Harley chuckles and nods his head to the side in a gesture to follow. "C'mon kid, let's hang out in the living room so Dad can sleep, yeah?"

He knew it was a long shot and just as he expected, Peter's eyes instantly teared up and he ducked his head back into the crevice of their Dad's arm, shaking his head adamantly. Twisting his body so now he could hug the man's arm tight to his chest, legs drawn up beneath him so his butt was now sticking up in the air. Peter hadn't left Tony's side all week. Even getting him to use the bathroom, or prying him away from Tony so *he* could use the bathroom, shouldn't be as much of a chore as it was. Tony needed to get better soon so they could give him an actual bath, cuz gosh the kid stunk so bad.

"Stay with Daddy..." He could vaguely hear Peter mumble.

He saw Tony shift slightly in his sleep, the nub of his left shoulder shifting as if he were trying to lift the arm that used to be there, then twitching his nose.

And, well, Harley's not opposed to sticking around for Peter's sake. That way he wasn't so lonely since their Dad was dead asleep. He gently closes the door behind him as he enters the room. He props up the baby monitor against the end table on Pepper's side then slips onto the bed and grabs for the remote discarded among the bedsheets.

"Alright then. You go ahead and nap and I'll watch a movie." He lays back against the headboard as JARVIS loads the list to the spot he'd ended at in the Living Room, and now Harley is droning through the boring process he'd just escaped from earlier.

He feels it has become more of a habit, clicking the little down arrow on the remote instead of actually looking at the movie titles. Maybe it's just a fidget thing and he likes watching the slew of movie titles disappear as he continues further down the list because it seemed like he no longer had any interest in choosing a movie. The endeavor was appearing to grow hopeless.

Soon, the decision is made for him.

"Star Wars?"

Harley turns to look at Peter, who's now facing the television with wide eyes.

"Since when do you know how to read?"

Peter grinned at him, all teeth, draping his body over Tony's stomach. "Daddy teached me two yes'erdays 'go."

Harley shrugs. "Fair enough... but I don't know if now's the time to watch Star Wars. We gotta take into consideration the order we watch the movies and we have to set aside enough time to watch at least three in a row...." He gestures animatedly with his hands. "Because I know that once

you start watching, and even once *I* start watching we'll have to watch--" Harley stops when he sees the way Peter's staring at him, having not comprehended a single word he said.

"Well... I mean maybe we should wait until--" this time he's interrupted.

"Just turn on the damn movie kid. It's not that c'mplicated," Tony grumbles, shifting onto his side. Peter shifts to keep leaning against him, tiny elbow propping against the man's hip so his chin could rest in his palm and he giggles.

"Daddy you 'wake now?"

"No, Daddy's sleeping." Tony's muttered words are barely distinguishable. "You two have fun." He was lying on his right side, and he draped his right arm over Peter's lap, holding the boy close as he drifts back off to sleep.

So, they watch Star Wars and Harley thinks it's safe to say that Peter was very well obsessed, and he's happy to know that his brother will end up as much of a nerd as he is.

Two thirds of the way through the movie a shrill cry sounds through the baby monitor sitting beside the bed and Harley pauses the movie before scrambling off the bed.

"I'll be right back Pete. I gotta go get Morgan."

"Where's Mama?" Peter's eyebrows furrow in both confusion and distress and his little fists curl in the wrinkled fabric of Tony's white undershirt.

Harley pauses... he didn't need Peter freaking out. Morgan continues to cry over through the baby monitor and Tony starts to shift in his sleep. He turns to glance at the door then back at Peter. He bites his lip. Pepper should be back in an hour, he might be able to delay the meltdown until then. "Mama just had to leave for a minute. She had to pick up something. She'll be back soon."

And *instantly!* Instantly... Peter bursts into tears.

"MAMA!!!" He screams, eyes screwing shut as he wails. Tony jolts awake.

"Peter! Wha-?" He's disoriented as he sits up and looks around the room for whatever it was that had Peter so distressed. He blinks as he looks first at Harley then back at Peter, pulling the kid close to himself to try and comfort him. "Peter. Hey-hey what's wrong pal?"

"Mommy! Mommy gone!" He sobs, cheeks already glistening brightly with tears and voice strained with hiccups and harsh breaths. Tony's head snaps up to stare at Harley.

"What?!" He snaps. "Where is she?"

"She's just picking something up. She'll be back really soon." He points his thumb to the door over his shoulder. "I'll explain when I get back though. I gotta go get Morgan real quick."

He hurries out of the room before Peter or Tony could reel him back in with their panicked inquiries.

He returns with Morgan suckling on the bottle of milk he warmed for her, only to find Peter in the midst of a full blown meltdown. Tony held him with his one arm, gently patting his back to try and soothe him, and when Harley walks in, he looks up with a tight glare.

"Where is Pepper?"

Harley shuffles, adjusting his hold on his sister. Tony was angry, and Peter's loud sobs definitely didn't help appease the man's frustration.

"She-she just went to the Tower to do a couple things and help Rhodey."

"She *what*?" Tony's lips pull back in a snarl and immediately begins shuffling beneath the covers. He keeps his one arm around Peter, and struggles with the lack of the other to get up from the bed. Harley sees the literal spark of orange ignite in his one eye and he knows what that means... he rushes over to start pushing him back onto the bed and calm him down. Tony was on strict orders to not present any inhuman powers, which means they were all also on strict orders to not stress Tony out or get him angry until he had time to properly get control of this new superpower of his.

"No-no-no Dad. You're supposed to stay in bed, remember? Mom's supposed to be home in like half an hour anyways! It's all fine, just calm down."

Tony had no way to fight against Harley while still holding Peter. Not in his current condition

"Harley get out of the way," he snaps just as his head hits the pillow.

"Sorry, no can do," Harley says, adjusting the blankets to tuck them in around his father like he was a child. "Mom put me in charge. Now, I'm going to go get you some food, because she said you were supposed to eat after you woke up... Peter--Petey hey," he reached over to shake the boy's shoulder, but he continued to cry, muffling the sharp wails in his father's shirt. "Hey, Mama's gonna be back real soon, and she said that Zio and Zia are comin' today too and you'll get to see them.."

Tony was still frowning, but he did his share in coaxing Peter to calm down. And now Harley understands why Pepper decided to sneak out when everyone was sleeping, because, goodness, apparently Peter wasn't the only one with separation anxiety....

When Pepper comes home, it's followed by another meltdown. She walks into the room and sets down her bag on a chair to find all four of them lounging on the bed, dejectedly watching Star Wars, and as soon as Peter spots her he bursts into tears and reaches out for her. His crying spurs on Morgan's tears, and it's just an all around mess.

"Oh... baby," Pepper soothes, moving straight for the bed and scooping him up. Peter clings to her and cries into the shoulder of her blouse and blazer. "I'm so sorry, I just had to pick up something-"

"Cut the bullshit," Tony snaps, sitting himself up on the bed to glare at his wife. "We got people for that."

Pepper glares right back, placing a hand on the back of Peter's head to stroke his hair. "I had some things to take care of Tony. Don't snap at me."

"I'll snap when I want to fu--" he glances at Peter and lowers his voice. "You can't just sneak out of the house, and leave me alone with three kids when I can't get out of the flippin' bed without telling me where you're going and expect me not to get angry Pepper."

Harley glances back and forth between his parents. He'd never heard them fight like this before. It was probably because of Tony's most recent disposition towards anger, but *still*.

"If I would have told you, you would have insisted on coming, Tony, and you *can't*."

Tony's eye glimmered. "Where did you go, Potts?"

“I met with the *lawyers* Tony,” she emphasizes with a pointed look.

Tony instantly cools down. “Oh,” he says.

Pepper sighs and rolls her eyes then looks towards Harley. “Kids, there’s a couple someones here that really wants to see you.” Then she pats Peter’s back to address him. “Honey, do you think you might be up to going out into the Living Room to say ‘hi’.”

He shakes his head against her shoulder and reaches an arm out behind him blindly. “Daddy.”

“Baby, you’ve been with Daddy every day for a whole week and he hasn’t moved once. I swear he’ll be right here when you come back.”

Peter peeks out to look up at her. His eyes were all puffy and shiny. “Double swear?”

Pepper smiles and nuzzles her nose against his which makes him smile. “Yes, I double swear.”

“Triple?”

“Where in the world are you learning these words my big boy, but yes I triple swear. In fact,” she grins, “I swear to you a million times that Daddy won’t move from that spot for the two minutes you come out to say hi, okay?”

Peter’s nose scrunches up in thought. “What ‘bout million and one times?”

“Silly boy,” Pepper exclaims, tickling his belly. “C’mon let’s go say hi really quick.” Then she looks at Tony over Peter’s shoulder. “No moving Dad, you hear me?”

Tony pats the bed beneath him. “Consider me glued to this spot. Dad’s not movin’.”

“Alright. Harley, you bring Morgan. C’mon guys.”

They walk into the Living Room and Peter’s worry is wiped clean away.

“Pietro! Il mio bambino!”

“Zia!” Peter laughs, reaching his arms out to the woman to be held. “Zio!” Then he does the same to Dom, hugging them both. “*I missed you.*”

Emilia and Dom stayed for a good couple weeks while Tony recovered. They had decided to stay a bit longer than just a short visit and everyone was more than happy with their decision. So, now it was back to just the five of them while they packed up their things back in Italy so they could get settled in a nice apartment a few blocks away from the safehouse the Stark’s had been staying in. Emilia had helped a lot with Morgan since Tony wasn’t technically allowed out of the bed yet and he struggled to feed her with one arm, especially with Peter clinging to him constantly... and Morgan was great. They were more tired, sure, and the timing of her arrival could only be described as inconvenient, but the family was more than willing to adapt in order to welcome the newest member of the family... things were great, but...

.... “*Peter, buddy, I love you, but Dad really can’t cuddle right now, okay?,*” Tony says while trying to juggle Morgan and Morgan’s bottle while Peter clung to his only arm. “*I have to take care of the baby while Mama’s napping.*”

.... “*Baby, no, I’m sorry.*” Pepper says as she bounces a screaming Morgan in her arms, “*Mommy can’t hold you right now.*”

“Peter, shhh, you gotta be quiet. The baby is sleeping,” Harley would shush when he cheers after Luke destroys the Death Star.

Peter hated it. He loved baby Morgan but now his parents were always too busy or too tired to feed him all the affection he desired. Cuddles with Dad were cut short, especially through the night when he or mom had to rock Morgan back to sleep. And even Harley was busy now that he was doing online school. Peter just felt so lonely. He thought having a baby sister would be so much fun... but now all she did was cry and his Mommy and Daddy would drop everything instantly to go take care of her- even him. They used to do that when Peter would start crying... but not so much anymore.

And it only got worse once Tony started PT. Peter thought it would be a good thing that Dad was able to get out of bed now so they could play and cook and build legos together outside of just the bedroom, but boy was he wrong. Now it just seemed that his Dad was grumpier than ever and the only kisses he could coax out of him were the goodnight ones.

And tonight was the first night he was made to sleep by himself... Morgan had started waking up more during the night and his Mama said that he has to try and get a good nights sleep so he wouldn't be a crab. That didn't make much sense to Peter. He didn't know how lack of sleep could turn a person into a crab. Was it a gradual transition? Or would he simply grow claws and a shell overnight?

And no matter how much he cried or begged to sleep in their bed, his Mama said no. She looked sad about it, and she gave him a big hug and a long kiss on his cheek, but it didn't make him feel better. So after she left him he curled up in his bed and cried and cried, hoping it'd call them back like it used to. He hasn't been all by himself since he was in the bad place. He felt scared and alone, and even though there was a night light shining in the corner, it was so dark with the scary shadows looming over his bed. He cried harder, thinking that maybe they just couldn't hear him, but when he realized that they wouldn't be coming to get him, it made his stomach churn and he sobbed. His face hurt and his chest stung, but he couldn't help it! His Mama and Daddy loved his little sister more than him and he doesn't know why! And now he was alone and scared because he did something bad to make his Mommy and Daddy not love him anymore!

His stomach cramped up and he whined, wrapping his arms tight around his waist. He felt sick...

“Master Peter. Are you alright?”

Peter whined again, and he shuddered at the sudden lurch in his belly. “Don’ feel good.”

He has just enough time to bolt upright into a sitting position before he vomits all over himself.

He wails, snot dribbling down his nose and sick down his chin. His stomach lurches once more, harsher this time, as his sobs worsened from what they were before. He gags, choking through his loud sobs and screams for his parents.

“Daddy!” He screams.

He knew that if it was before... *before* Morgan was here his Daddy would have been here already, holding him and rocking him to shush his tears and make him feel better. His Mama too, but he doesn't know how long he sits there on his bed, sweating, with a pile of sick on his lap and coating his favorite blanket.

Then his door swings open in the midst of a screeching wail, which only rises in volume when he notices who it was.

“Peter?”

It was Harley.

At least his brother still loves him.

Peter gags again. This time something comes up.

“Oh shit!” Harley turns away, bolting from the room just as quick as he appeared. “Mom! Dad!”

Peter can hear him stomp down the stairs, and run to their parents room. Then the heavy thumps as he pounded on their parents bedroom door across the house. Peter hopes his brother is able to convince them to come and he cries pitifully at the thought of that not even working.

Harley continues his banging and eventually one of the double doors swings open and their Dad stands in the threshold with Morgan screaming in his arms, a peeved look on his face.

“Harley. What the hell? I just got her back to sleep.”

“Peter’s sick!”

“Daddy!” Peter calls from upstairs in a panic, clutching his stomach when he felt another tight cramp. He didn’t want to get sick again. He really didn’t. “Daddy!”

“Shit!” Tony shoves Morgan into Harley’s arms and rushes up to Peter’s room, and Peter reaches for him instantly when he breaks through the threshold.

“Baby what happened?”

Peter continued reaching for him, making insistent grabby hands, but his Dad didn’t pick him up yet and only kneeled beside his big boy bed to slowly gather the blankets and move them out of the way. He was extra careful, and the process was much slower than it would have been with the use of another arm, but soon they had been discarded on the floor.

“Do you still feel sick?”

Peter shook his head and rubbed one eye with a fist as he hiccuped through another sob. “Nooo-oo, I-I-I-I wan-wanted to sle-ep with ‘ou an’ Mama!”

Tony stroked his hair, eyebrows drawn together tight as he looked down at him with sorrow. “I know you did, buddy, but what made you so sick? Did your stomach hurt before bed?”

“I don’ know!” Peter screamed, head thrown back and eyes squeezed shut as he screamed. Then he gagged, and he bent at the waist as he dry heaved. His Dad shuffled around in a panic, but that was it. Soon enough it was over again and he was back to crying.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, okay?”

Peter nods and raises his arms to be held as his Daddy stands, but instead of lifting him up he slowly begins trying to roll up his pajama shirt. It wasn’t working though. He only had one arm and he was still getting used to simple tasks without the other limb. So, Pepper had done most of the dressing and undressing of Peter and Morgan since they got back.

And now, Peter’s head was wedged in the collar and his left arm was stuck in the air at an awkward angle and the sobbing, of course, became worse.

“Alright, alright, hang on... shit!” Tony turns to look over his shoulder then hollers down the hall. “Harley!”

The boy rushes in, arms void of his sister, meaning the screaming baby was currently in the safe hands of her mother.

“Help me with your brother.” And together they were able to manhandle Peter out of his soiled clothes without smearing it all over his face. They got him into the bath and Tony had to sit on the toilet lid the whole time due to his still recovering injuries. Harley did all the dirty work.

Peter’s crying had lessened considerably and he showed no more signs of getting sick. Tony had even checked his temperature and he was fine. He would have to call Bruce to the house tomorrow just to check and make sure everything was fine and Peter wasn’t about to spread a bug to the whole family. God, they did *not* need that right now. He and Pepper were exhausted enough, as is.

The only time Peter’s crying stopped, was when he was wrapped in a fluffy towel after his bath and was cuddled up in his Dad’s lap on the mattress of his big boy bed while Harley fetched him a clean pair of clothes from his dresser.

Tony stroked his hair, rocking him side to side as he hummed a familiar song under his breath.

“S’leep with you.” Peter mumbled brokenly when he was pulled away so they could put some new clothes on him.

“Yes, you can sleep with me tonight.” Tony sighs, tugging up the waist of his astronaut pajama pants. Peter sighs in content and lifts his hand to slip two fingers into his mouth to suck on and he closes his eyes.

And by the time they were done dressing him, the boy looked dead asleep. The whole ordeal must have tired him out. And Tony sighed, head bowing so his chin brushed his chest and he rubbed at his tired eyes. He didn’t even bother trying to remove Peter’s fingers. “My God, children are exhausting.”

“Hey!” Harley whispered.

Tony lifted his head and smirked at him, and tossed his arm around the kid’s shoulders to pull him in for a playful hug. “Not you, there’s a whole ‘nother adjective I’d use for you.” Then he ruffles his hair just before Harley’s able to shove him away with a teasing glare.

The exhaustion seeped back into his eyes. “Thank you for your help though, Ace. You really came through tonight.” He gave him a firm pat on the back and Harley smiled. “I just have one more mission for you then you can retire for the night, deal?”

Harley nods, pressing his palm over his mouth while he yawns. Tony yawns in response.

“Take the kiddo to Mom and I’s room,” he instructs after recovering, “I gotta clean this mess up.”

“Morgan’s still screaming though...” Harley glances towards the door, and sure enough the loud screams of a baby suffering from colic echoes all the way from the downstairs to reach their ears, and Tony sighs. It comes out more like a miserable keened though as his head drops in defeat again and he tips forward to rest his head against the side of Peter’s mattress.

If Harley didn’t know any better he’d say he fell asleep like that, because he didn’t move for several moments. Then the man sits up abruptly and rubs his hand down his face with a quick release of breath. “God,” he breathes, “I’m gonna lose it.”

Harley grimaces, and hesitates for a small moment before he sits up on his knees to wrap an arm over his father's shoulders, situating himself about a head taller than him sitting on the ground so he could prop his chin up on his Dad's head.

"Oh c'mon. You're the great Tony Stark. Don't let two little kids be your downfall. I don't think that would do well for your reputation, or mine either really. Y'know since I'd have to live with everyone knowing my Dad was finally driven insane by an infant and toddler."

"You've gotta point." Tony mutters.

"I'll take Pete for a lap around the house, and hopefully by then Mama would've calmed Morgan down by then. You can take care of this shit." Harley pulls away and his nose wrinkles in disgust at the smell.

"Watch your mouth--," Tony begins before deflating once more, "I really don't care." Harley can only smile.

Separation anxiety.

Codependency.

That was Bruce's diagnosis, and Tony wasn't exactly surprised. It made sense. Ever since Peter came to stay with them, he'd been reluctant to be very far from either himself or Pepper, but it only grew worse after they got back from Hydra. It took several days before Pepper was able to leave the room without Peter screaming bloody murder, and it took even longer to drag him away from Tony's presence. They thought the situation had gotten better once Tony was nearly healed, but apparently he and Pepper had just been too tired to really notice.

That was another one of Bruce's verdicts. He and Pepper were very much sleep deprived, and, well, Tony knew that was very much true. Caring for an infant, and two traumatized children was more tiring than anything he'd ever experienced, and now Bruce was saying there were more issues?

"Tony," Bruce scolds under his breath as soon as the two boys disappear down the hall at both parents coaxing, "you *need* to get them some help. I told you this as soon as you got back."

Tony growled at him, rubbing at his shoulder to try and ease the phantom pains of his missing arm. "You don't think I'm working on it? There aren't many child therapists that I feel comfortable disclosing the necessary information to. And you said this kind of reaction was normal," he hissed, "you didn't tell me it was that bad."

"I told you that if you didn't get a handle on the problem then it would get worse," Bruce retaliates, "and now it's *worse*. Harley's blood pressure is through the roof and now Peter has no personal autonomy, and you two keep feeding into this unhealthy dependence."

"What should we do--" Pepper starts, but Tony cuts her off with an angry scowl.

"You're telling me I shouldn't comfort my kids Banner?! You're trying to say I shouldn't feed them all the attention they want after they were kidnapped and traumatized?" He can feel the familiar orange tinge begin to develop.

"No," Bruce replies, keeping his tone even and calm, "that's not what I'm saying. I'm just trying to make you understand that there is a certain way of dealing with these things and if this continues and you don't get them help, neither of those kids will be able to function properly when they grow

up. They need a professional to help them process these new fears and emotions,”

Tony glares. He’s not angry at Bruce, but he wants to be. He wants to be angry at him so bad because then that would mean that he wasn’t in the wrong. That he wasn’t the one fucking up his kids.

Pepper places a hand on his arm as she speaks to Bruce. “What do you recommend we do then?”

“First find a therapist... and just keep doing what you're doing. Reassure them, take care of them, and love them.” He leans forward to place a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “You’re a great father Tony. I’m sorry for making you feel otherwise.”

Tony clapped Bruce’s hand in a non-verbal acceptance of the apology.

Bruce stands from the couch. “Check in with Harley too... I notice he hasn’t been sleeping or eating very well. He might be repressing some things now that you two have your hands full with Morgan and Peter, and it’s not healthy for him.”

Tony nods. “I’ll talk to him.”

Harley peeks out his doorway and glances towards the stairs to make sure no one else was awake. He couldn’t see any lights on downstairs so he deemed it safe then slowly descended his way to the living room. He falls onto the couch, wrapping the warm blanket around his shoulders as he tucks his legs up beneath himself. He watches the front door aptly, nerves prickling and heat building behind his ears from the anticipation. Logically, he knows nobody would be walking through that door with intent to harm him or his family. JARVIS monitors the entire surrounding area, and there are guards posted all across the property. They were safe... he knows that, but he couldn’t help but worry.

“I was wondering when you’d slink on out here.” Harley’s head snaps in the direction of the familiar voice and he scrambles off the couch. The kitchen light flicks on to reveal his father standing at the counter with a coffee mug lifting to his lips.

“D-Dad!” Harley stutters with a slight waver. “What are--what--what are you doing out here.”

“I was waiting for you.” Tony slowly lowers the mug back down to the counter then moves towards him until he stands directly in front of Harley with a studious frown. “Bruce said you haven’t been sleeping well... and I figured it might be because you’ve picked up some old habits again.” Tony stares down at him intently, and Harley has to shift his gaze away to stare at the floor.

“You need sleep, baby,” Tony whispers with a soft undertone, and Harley’s head snaps up immediately just as Tony’s hand brushes through his hair. Tony’d never called him that before, not in English at least. The man must be absolutely exhausted... “It’s not healthy. Are you having nightmares?” The man continues like it wasn’t a big deal, and it makes Harley’s heart ache. The want to just lean forward and be held and comforted by his father as intense as it’s ever been, but that annoying prickle of anxiety made him fear the potential rejection. Even though he *knows* Tony would never reject him when he asked for comfort-- he knows that. Tony wouldn’t think any less of him for it.

He shakes his head in answer to the question though.

“No nightmares?” Tony is sure to confirm, and Harley shakes his head again.

You can't have nightmares if you never go to sleep... and even when he does eventually pass out from exhaustion his sleep is far too deep to ever remember the nightmare that had him waking up in a cold sweat to begin with. Life itself just seemed like some wild unwaking dream more often than not.

"Then what's wrong?" Tony pressed. Harley can see the exhaustion on his face and he knows the man probably just wants to go to bed and rest instead of dealing with him and his issues. Goodness knows the man needed the rest. Harley's done his best trying to help out his mom and dad with Peter and Morgan to reduce the load on their backs, but there was only so much he could do with Peter's refusal to be away from either of them for more than ten minutes at a time. But giving them one less kid to worry over was one thing he *knew* helped. He was *fine*. In fact, he's actually quite surprised with *how fine* he is. He would have expected much more trauma to come after what he had experienced, but now it felt like nothing more than a looming nightmare that he couldn't forget. None of it felt like it really happened and the only reason he knows it did is the physical scars it left behind on both him and his father. It was hard sometimes to not stare at the nub of his shoulder or the cotton gauze hiding the ugly absence of his eye.

So, he smiles to reassure his father and reaches out to pat the man's arm like they were simply friends, not father and son. "Nothing's wrong Dad. I'm fine. I just like the peace of a dark, quiet house. It reminds me of when we'd all go outside at night when we were in Italy."

Lie. Lies. All lies. He hates the dark and he hates quiet. He can't find peace in them anymore.

Tony stares intently at him, and Harley knows he wasn't buying it. Even though he should because he's honestly totally and completely *fine*. There was no reason for him to worry. So what if he feels just a tiny bit more clingy to his parents, yet finds himself unable to act on it. That was normal and expected, right? Both of them almost died. He saw both of them in pain. And he was a teenager. It was *normal*.

He was fine.

As long as he knew where they were and he could hear them if they shouted... It was fine.

Tony grabs his arm in that harsh, serious way he does sometimes and drags him down onto the couch to sit beside him. He doesn't let go.

"Harley..." That's twice now that Tony's said his name...

Tony sighs and drops his head. "Harley, I know things have been difficult lately. I know, I get it. I was stuck in that damned bed for a long time, and me and your mother have both been busy with the kids and SI, and you've been such a big help with taking care of your brother and sister when we're too tired or too busy." He lifts his hand to grip Harley's shoulder. "You're such a great big brother, and I don't think you understand how much me and Mom both appreciate that. We really do... But I--I realized that maybe we haven't taken enough time to take care of *you*."

Harley feels his chest constrict and his eyes begin to water. He scolds himself. There was no need to cry; he shouldn't cry. There was no reason. He wasn't a damn baby... but then he looked up at his father's face when he urged him with a gentle chuck beneath the chin and he could see the distress in the man's eyes.

"I'm so sorry kiddo..."

Harley snuffles, and rushes to wipe his nose with his sleeve. He turns away and shrugs. "I'm all good. You and Mom don't gotta worry about me. I'm a big boy, I can take care of myself."

"I know you can, but you shouldn't have to... and you obviously haven't been doing such a good job lately. JARVIS tells me you haven't had a full night's sleep since the first night we got back. It's been over a month and a half kiddo."

Harley gives him a look. "What? Like you and Mom have slept through the whole night since Morgan's been born. It's not a big deal Dad. I'm probably just still in the habit of being up all night while-while we were... you know."

Tony frowns. It's been over a month and they still haven't talked about all that had happened... Harley hasn't dared to bring it up until now. Maybe that was part of the issue. He sits back against the couch, getting himself comfortable and urges Harley to do the same before he speaks. "Tell me what happened."

Harley stiffens, rolling the fabric of his shirt between his fingers. "Nothing to really write home about. Me and Peter would just spend most of our days reading the books they left or coloring with the crayons. It kept him occupied."

"But you didn't sleep?"

Harley glared at him like the question offended him. "How could I? For all I knew, they were just waiting for me to lower my guard so they could grab Peter while I was asleep. I would sleep a little, but it was light and only when it was absolutely necessary. It didn't end up mattering anyway, I guess." He shrugged and looked back up at Tony. He could feel the sting in his eyes again. The sting of failure and dread of seeing the disappointment on his father's face after he tried so *hard*. He tried so hard to keep his brother safe, but he failed even at that.

He choked on a hard sob as the guilt pushed against his lungs. The apology fell from his mouth before he could control it. "I tried Dad. I promise that I did. I tried really hard."

He's pulled into a tight hug. His Dad's strong arm wrapped around his back, hand circling around the back of his neck to hold him close. They're heads are pressed close together and Harley can feel the distinct pressure of a kiss pressed above his ear. "I don't doubt it for a second. You're one of the strongest people I know, and I am so so damn proud."

Harley cries. He can't help it. He hugs him back, pressing his face into his chest and just clinging to the man as tightly as he could manage, absorbing the comfort of the embrace as much as he could.

"I'm so honored to have the right to call you my son. I hope you know that."

Harley's afraid he might end up hurting him with how hard he's squeezing. "Ti viglio bene papà"

"Ti viglio bene anch'io mimmo."

They stayed like that for a few more minutes, and it wasn't nearly long enough, but Harley didn't dare request for more when his father patted his back and insisted he go get some rest, officially ending the hug.

"Do you wanna come sleep in our bed tonight? We've got plenty of room?" Tony offered quietly.

"No, I'm fine," Harley immediately answered, feeling a blush rise up his neck, knowing that his answer was a complete lie.

His Dad must sense the truth. "You sure? Mama probably needs a good cuddle. I've been hogging

Peter most nights,” the tone is borderline teasing but it doesn’t change Harley’s mind.

“Alright then, you’re loss. But no more sneaking out here to the couch, alright? You need to get your beauty sleep. I know you don’t want a nice ol’ pimply face just yet... Actually I think I see one right here---” His face breaks out in a teasing smile as he gently pokes his index finger to the tip of Harley’s nose, then gives it a small tweak.

“Dad!” Harley squeaks, swatting his hand away. “Quit it. Geez.”

“Alright, alright, fine,” Tony chuckles. “Now go get your ass into bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

They stand and Harley shuffles on his feet. Tony notices the hesitation.

“You good?”

“Mhm,” Harley nods, but he doesn’t stop his twitching. He wanted something...

Tony places a hand on his back and gives him a small push forward as they both fall into a slow pace forward. Harley thinks they’ll part ways when they pass his parents bedroom, but his Dad’s hand doesn’t drop from his shoulder as they continue up the stairs.

Tony pushes open Harley’s bedroom door and steps into the room, guiding Harley in beside him.

“Dad?”

“C’mon,” Tony coaxed, “I’m not going back to bed until I know you’re taken care of, okay?” He pulls back the covers of his large queen bed and gestures for him to get beneath the covers.

Harley hesitates, shooting his Dad a look. He didn’t need to be tucked in. He wasn’t a child. But of course he had no control over that ill-timed ache in his heart as his Dad gently tucked the blankets and comforter snugly around his form. A calloused hand lands on his cheek and Harley closes his eyes, feeling a sudden wave of exhaustion wash over him. The hand migrates to his hair slowly, weaving through the muted curls on his head.

“Do you want me to stay until you fall asleep?”

He blinks open his eyes to find his father kneeling beside his bed, looking down at him like he was the most treasured possession he owned, and Harley felt so *loved*.

It must be a dream.

He doesn’t care that it’s bab-ish to say yes. His Dad loves him even if it was just a dream or one of those hallucinations he’s grown prone too. So, Harley nods his head to accept the offer.

He feels the slight dip in his bed for only a moment, before he feels the heaviness pull him into a deep sleep. The constant weight of the strong hand on his head serves as a shield to protect him from the monsters lurking in his past. He doesn’t think he’s slept so well in a very long time.

The next morning Tony contemplates the best way to bring up the topic of therapy. Pepper and him have held long, ongoing conversations about it and they both agree it’d be best to start as soon as possible, especially after Bruce had expressed such a serious concern about Peter’s meltdown. It took a couple days, but Tony has finally found a therapist he’d be willing to try out. She was a nice lady; older but from what he could tell over the phone, very kind and patient. She reminded him of

Zia Emilia, and he thinks that might help both the boys warm up to her.

They were going to break it to them easy.

Tony carries Morgan in his arm, and Peter's hand fists in the fabric of his sweats as he trudged down the stairs where he'd just finished dressing both the kids. He was exhausted. After coaxing Harley to sleep, Morgan had remained up almost all night, and it wasn't until an hour ago that she finally decided it was time for a nap.

"Daddy," Peter whined, jumping adamantly on his feet and reaching up towards Tony to be held. Tony sighs, exasperated. He doesn't know how many times he's had to explain this to Peter for him to get it.

"Peter," Tony begins to reason, "Dad's holding Morgan right now. I can't hold both of you, remember?"

"Noooo," Peter whines again.

The kid hadn't slept through the night either... he'd wormed his way into their bed as he did most nights, and Morgan wasn't opposed to interrupting her brother's sleep either. So, now he was a bit of a crab, which didn't bode well for their plans that morning.

"I *hate* MoMo!" He screamed. "I hate her! I wish she never got borned!" The last part is said with a hateful scowl, like he had meant it as a threat.

Tony bristled, feeling a hot spark claw up his spine, but before he could properly react Peter darted down the last few steps, into the Living Room to seek out refuge from his mother. She'd woken up early to spend some time with their eldest while Tony got the younger two ready for the day.

She sat on the couch with Harley, the teen cuddled up beside her, eating up the affection like a starved infant, but Peter had no qualms in disrupting his brother's peace as he clambered onto his mother's lap with a loud wail, practically pushing his brother away as he did.

"Peter," she scolded gently, trying to ease him out of her lap. She saw Tony come storming out from behind the corner with a heated look on his face, glaring daggers at the young boy.

"Daddy *hate* me!" Peter cried, glaring back at his father with a dirty scowl. "He hates me!"

"Oh Peter," Pepper soothed, gently pulling him back into her lap. "Daddy doesn't hate you."

She sees the look on Tony's face and is quick to do some damage control before the situation got too out of hand. Harley must notice the tension as well because he scrambles off the couch to stand in his father's path as he storms towards the couch.

"Dad, chill." He says, placing a hand on the man's chest to halt his steps. He looked so angry; he'd never seen Tony look so angry at Peter before. "What happened?"

Tony ignored the question and made a gruff noise like an animal grunting in annoyance. He took a couple deep breaths until the heat slowly diluted into the familiar sting.

"Peter," he spoke slowly, tilting forward to transfer Morgan into Harley's arms. "Come here, *please*." He holds out his hand, pushing the last word out with grit teeth. Peter turns away from him, turning his face into Pepper's collar and squeezing closer to her.

"Peter!" He said with more of a cold snap. "Come!"

Peter's body shudders with the harsh tone of the command, and he cries out a loud "no!"

Harley winces, clutching Morgan closer. Peter's never been so insubordinate, and Harley could almost see Tony's eye twitch. Harley knows all too well what it's like to be on the other side of that unamused frown Tony always acquired when he did something particularly stupid. He's happy to say after all this time he had learned his lesson, but it seemed that now it was time for Peter to learn his and Harley could only feel pity for his brother.

Pepper sighs and slowly peels Peter's arms from around her neck.

"Peter, get your ass over here right now," Tony growls. Harley noticed he wasn't glowing orange yet so that was a good sign. At least he was getting control over it

At that particular instruction Peter quickly scrambles off his mother's lap and stands in front of his father with his head bowed and his hands gently kneading together.

"I so sorry," Peter whispered softly.

"Saying sorry doesn't fix this situation Peter," Tony spits angrily. He grabs Peter's arm and pulls him closer. "Do you know why I'm mad?"

Peter's hand inches up to his mouth to soothe on two of his fingers, but his father gives a rough tug to his wrist to pull his fingers away from his mouth.

"Peter," He says, "Why am I upset with you?"

Peter shrugs, avoiding eye contact as best he could, but Tony grabs his chin and forces his gaze up at him.

"I'm mad for three reasons and you're about to give me a fourth. So you best start guessing."

"Tony--" Pepper scolds under her breath. "Maybe you should do this in private."

Tony shakes his head but doesn't tear his gaze away. "No. I'm not going to risk putting myself in a room alone with him right now." He pauses and both Harley and Pepper can see the distinguishable flicker of orange light up in his eye before it quickly fades. "Peter?"

Peter's lip wobbles. "I was mean to Morgan."

Tony nods. "Yes you were. Very mean. And if I *ever* hear you say anything like that ever again about anyone in this house, there will be dire consequences. Do you understand? We do not speak about eachother like that, even when we are angry."

Peter nods and bows his head once more. "Yes Daddy."

Tony pulls his gaze up again. "You are a big brother now and I expect you to act like it. Understand?"

Peter's nod is staticky but it's clear enough for Tony to relent his hold. And Peter immediately backs away.

"Now," Tony begins again, releasing a calming breath, "don't you ever say no to me like that again? When I tell you to do something, you do it."

Peter's head bobs up and down continuously. "Yes' sir."

“Good, now you’re going to spend an hour up in your room. I’ll call you down for breakfast.”

Immediately, tears begin to fall down the boy’s cheeks and his mouth snaps open to protest, but Tony raises one brow and his mouth falls shut with a quick snap. He sniffles and turns to look over his shoulder at his mother, like she would argue in his defense, but she says nothing.

Then he turns his gaze back to his father, eyes wide and red as the tears drip down his face.

Tony softened just a tad and he kneeled in front of him. “Hey, I’m not doing this to be mean, okay? I love you and I want you to be the best person you can possibly be, and sometimes that means I have to be a little strict, okay? I love you, and you need to learn that actions have consequences. So go on up to your room.”

“P’ease,” Peter begged softly, reaching his arms out for a hug.

Harley watches Tony hesitate slightly, like he wasn’t sure if it was appropriate or not, but he gives in and wraps his arm around Peter for a couple seconds before gently pushing him away and in the direction of his room. Peter slowly slinks up the stairs and past the threshold of his room, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Oh, how quickly the mood of a morning could turn.

“I’m scheduling him an appointment for Dr. Cherry today.” Tony states as soon as Peter was beyond earshot. He pulls out his phone and grunts in annoyance. “I’m not going to let this get any worse.”

Pepper nods her agreement.

“Who’s Dr. Cherry?” Harley asks, gently humming under his breath while he holds an awoken Morgan close to his chest before she could start screaming again.

Tony tilts his head to the side to look at him then he sighs. “Well this wasn’t exactly how I planned on telling you, but Bruce recommended we look into finding a therapist for you and Peter. I’m scheduling you both an appointment for this evening.” He lifts the phone in his hand as a vague gesture of the call he was about to make.

“Therapy?” Harley’s brows furrowed. “I don’t need therapy. I’m fine.”

Tony doesn’t look all that surprised by his disagreement. “Peter needs it.”

“Well of course Peter needs it!”

“And he’ll follow your lead. If you refuse to go, so will he.”

God, Harley hates it when Tony puts him in a corner like that. Now he has no choice but to go. He didn’t need therapy; he wasn’t a little pansy.

When he doesn’t put up any more protests, Tony nods in approval and turns towards the kitchen with his phone to his ear. Harley pouts and sits back down on the couch beside his mother. He cradles Morgan in his arms and curls close to Pepper like he was earlier, leaning his head against her shoulder.

“I don’t need therapy, Mama. I really don’t. Dad’s just being paranoid again. Nothing’s wrong with me.”

Pepper sighs. "Of course nothing's wrong with you baby. Needing help doesn't mean you're weak. We all need some help after what we went through."

Harley lifts his head in surprise. "Even Dad?"

"Especially Dad. Once you and Peter start going, it will be a lot easier for me to coax him into it. Bruce already told me it will be a necessary part of his recovery. If he doesn't properly process what happened and find good outputs for his emotions then he'll never be able to get a handle on his new abilities. Would you be ashamed of your father if he needed help processing his emotions?"

"Of course not!"

Pepper smiles at him and hugs him close. "Then you shouldn't be ashamed either, Honey. You went through so much and I couldn't be more proud of you for keeping your head on straight when you needed to, but you don't have to be so strong all the time anymore. You haven't been sleeping... Daddy told me." She holds his head against her, kissing his hair gently. "And I want you to feel better, baby. I don't like seeing my babies feel bad."

"Okay," Harley gently agrees, leaning into her touch and the warmth it offered.

"Good boy," She whispers.

"--Alright, the appointment is at 4. I called Barton too and he's gonna bring some breakfast. I'm gonna head down to the shop to work on a couple things. Harley you're with me." He makes a waving hand gesture to guide Harley towards him, and Harley jumps off the couch, jostling his sister in his excitement and she whines.

"Sorry," he winces, handing the frustrated infant over to their mother. She waves him off with a smile and Harley vaults over the couch to run over to his father. The man's arm raised in invitation and Harley slides right up underneath it, draping it over his shoulders.

"I didn't know we had a shop at this house."

"I have a shop at all my safe houses."

"So, what projects are we working on? Are they new? Is it a weapon? Are we building it or designing it? I remember last time--"

"Okay okay," Tony laughed just as he opened the door to the basement and they began their descent. "I forgot how hyper you could get. Gimme a second and you'll see."

And "see" Harley did. Tony had been working during all that time he was on bedrest. Apparently Peter would help him at night designing the prosthetic arm he planned to use. He mentioned something about developing a form of AR technology that would help him communicate with JARVIS through the means of a prosthetic eye. It sounded *very* Terminator to him.

God, Harley loved Terminator.

Harley did a lot of the footwork, and a lot of the physical manufacturing of the design while his father talked him through the processes. Tony had tried and failed to do a few of the more basic motor functions he'd typically use both hands for. He got frustrated fairly quick, but he didn't voice it beyond an annoyed tone while asking for Harley to take over for him.

Harley hadn't even begun to piece together the basic framework of the design before JARVIS was interrupting them.

"Sir, Lady Stark is requesting your assistance in dealing with Master Peter."

"It hasn't been an hour yet. He should still be in his room."

"Yes sir, but there was a slight situation."

That was enough to have Tony rushing back upstairs, Harley hot on his heels. They clamber up both sets of stairs in record time, and Tony pushes Peter's bedroom door just in time with the sound of a loud retch.

"Aw shit!" Harley shouts with a small gag, backing out of the room. "Not again."

Peter's hunkered over his trash bin beside his tiny desk, and Pepper sat kneeled beside him rubbing his back.

"What happened?" Tony asks, dropping down beside her to pet back Peter's sweaty curls.

"He cried himself sick again." Pepper sighs.

"Geez kid," Tony sighed, dropping his head. "We gotta stop meeting like this, hm?"

"Daa--" Peter moans. "Daddy." He reaches out his hand, flexing his fingers towards Tony, and Tony takes his hand.

"Hey Bubba, you feeling just a little better?"

"Noooo," He gags into the bin.

"Okay, okay. You're okay." Tony squeezes his hand. They sat there with him for several minutes while he heaved into the bin.

"Kay 'm done." Peter mumbled after a good five minutes, pushing away from the trash bin and reaching up to wrap his arms around Tony's neck. "Up."

"Alright, let's get you cleaned up then, I guess." Tony lifts him up with a plan to beeline towards the bathroom in case there was another incident.

"Sir, Mr. Barton's car requests entry at the main gate."

"Let him through JARVIS." Pepper says. She turns to Tony and pets his arm. "I'll take care of breakfast. You take care of Peter."

Tony gives Peter a quick bath, ignoring the boy's persistent pleas for bubbles and toys. This was an in and out operation, not a two hour long scrub down. There were things he needed to do today. Such as finishing his prosthetic arm.

The water drains and he grunts in pain as he slowly stands back to his feet. Kneeling in one spot for so long was a killer on his bones and muscles. "C'mon kiddie. Lets get dry." He holds up the blue shark towel with the hood decorated in shark teeth protruding from the hem. Peter adored it. Tony hung the hood on his head and let the boy wrap the rest of the towel around his body.

He knew the drill by now.

Tony lifted him from the bath and headed back towards his room. He lays Peter on his bed, relieved to find Pepper had taken the sick filled trash bin downstairs.

“Alright, what kinda Underoos are you gonna sport today, sport?” He murmurs as he picks out a pair.

“Batman, please,” Peter answered the rhetorical question and Tony obliged.

Tony agrees with his fine choice, wrapping the towel back around the boy. As a father of several months, he now knows that dressing a little boy in fresh, clean clothes just before a messy meal of syrupy pancakes was a recipe for disaster. He’s learned his lesson.

Just before they head downstairs to enjoy a family breakfast, Peter reaches forward to grab his hand.

“I’m really sorry,” Peter whispers, bottom lip pulling out as his eyes begin to well with tears again.

Tony picks him up and holds him close, swaying on his feet. “All was forgiven as soon as you came upstairs Mimmo. I’m sorry I was harsh with you, but you can’t talk about your little sister like that. She’s a baby and she’s going to need a bit more attention from Mommy and Daddy just like you need more attention from us than Harley. But I promise that we still love you even though we’re sometimes tired and busy with your sister, okay?”

Peter nods, lying his head on his shoulder as Tony continues his swaying.

“Good. Do you feel bad about what you said?”

Peter nods.

“Why do you feel bad? Is it because it made me upset?”

Peter nods again. “‘N cuz I love MoMo. I did’n’ mean it.”

Tony smiles in relief. He was worried there for a second. “Good man,” he praises. “Now let’s go down and eat some pancakes.”

“Tony!” Pepper called out for him and he froze. That wasn’t her usual octave to shout for his attention.

“Honey?” He called back carefully, he rushed down the stairs twisting around the corner of the kitchen and check what was wrong. “What’s--” He pauses, body going completely tense as he turns at the waist to hide Peter from view. “The hell you think you’re doing here?”

Tony felt bare without his other arm to wield a weapon. Something; anything. He would have been able to grab the knife he always had tucked into his waistband, whether it were sweatpants or suit trousers, he was always prepared. Or he could go for the hidden pistol in the cloaked wall cavity. Instead he was holding Peter with his only means of providing protection.

Pepper reads his mind for him. She calmly grabs Harley’s arm and tugs him closer towards Tony and she reaches out to take Peter from Tony’s arm. She fixes his towel and tucks it protectively around his body before leaning forward like she was going to kiss Tony’s cheek.

“Say the word and I’ll get him out of here,” she whispers softly before pressing a soft kiss right in front of his ear.

"I'm fine," he smiles back at her, "why don't you guys go outside--" He pauses abruptly as he thinks about it and shakes his head violently. "Actually, why don't you guys go down to my shop. Harley can work on our little project until I get down there."

That was the only place he could guarantee their safety if he ended up having to initiate a lockdown.

Once they were gone Tony turned back towards the small group gathered in his kitchen.

"Barton, we've really got to discuss where your loyalties lie." Tony snapped.

"Well they sure as hell don't lie with you Stark."

"Good to know," Tony scowls. "Now why are you here?" He's not angry yet, but he could feel the signs beginning to fester.

"I wanted to see how you were doing. Dr. Banner said you're well into your recovery phase."

Tony lifted his chin slightly as he studied the man. It was hard to get a read on him.

"Cut to the chase Fury, you're not one for small talk."

Fury frowns, caught in the act, and he cuts to the chase. "I want to form a partnership, Stark."

"And what makes you think that I can trust you enough for that?"

"Do you have any reason not to?"

And, no, now that he thought about it, there was no outright evidence to deter him from trusting this man. Every kerfuffle they've had, has always been Tony stirring the pot and instigating their conflicts. The only outright attack Shield has ever performed on his men or family, were against his father and grandfather during the war and when Romanoff killed Obadiah. They've been the enemy for so long... and now that he sat and thought about it... he couldn't really pinpoint the reason behind it. Maybe all this time it was just a family rivalry he was keeping fresh in honor of his father.

So, Fury answered the question for him. "*Your father* had a reason not to trust us, but that's it."

"Hydra," Tony accuses with a scowl. "For years your organization has been riddled with Hydra agents hiding right beneath your noses. I don't deal well with Nazi's."

"That was your father's doing, Stark."

Tony bristles, taking a startled step backwards. His father was a terrible, terrible man, but he would *never*. He helped defeat the Nazis during World War II. "Are you calling my father a Nazi." The accusation stirs up a sharp heat in his stomach and he grits his teeth together.

Fury takes a single step forward, leaving Phil and Barton a step behind him. "I'm saying that you need to watch your back. Who do you think founded Shield in the first place?"

"Stop planting things into my head to turn me against my father. He was a great man!"

No he wasn't.

Fury looks at him, and Tony's afraid to say it almost looks like pity this man was giving him. "You don't actually believe that, do you?--"

He did... Howard was a good man, but he wasn't a good father. He tried his best.

--your mother didn't."

That set him off. The confined heat in his chest spread and he snapped. With a low growl he bounded forward with three large steps and grabbed the front of the man's dark trench coat, throwing him against the kitchen wall.

"Don't speak about my mother like you knew her." He spat, having enough lucidity to let go of the man and take a step back before his temper got any more out of control.

"You really know nothing about your family history, do you Stark?" Fury coughed as he pushed himself off the wall.

"I know enough to know I shouldn't believe a word you have to say."

"I knew my word wouldn't be enough," Fury reached his hand out to Coulson and Coulson handed him an aged folder packed full of papers, "I brought a few things you might want to see for yourself. Sit." He gestures towards the island bar stools and Tony takes a wary seat as Fury sets the folder in front of him.

"Your father and I used to be good friends."

And sure enough, at the very top was a young Howard Stark and a young Nick Fury leant up against the hood of a familiar red 1930s Alfa Romeo Tony had seen in too many of his father's old photos. He looks to the next photo of Fury working alongside his father and grandfather with cigars hanging leisurely from their mouths.

"We were partners."

Tony looked up at him, hearing the pain in his voice. In all his years of knowing Nick Fury he never thought the man was capable of any type of emotion besides indifference and frustration.

"We had an idea; one that we were sure would change the world for the better." Fury leaned forward to pull out one of the larger photos attached to a document... It was of Howard holding up a sketch of the Shield logo, followed by an unsigned document declaring equal partnership between two parties. Howard's signature line was empty, but Fury's was full and legible beside the blank space.

"We had plans to overthrow Leonard, your grandfather. Your father was the one who recruited and made plans and designs, I was just his voice of reason. But when the time came and he was faced with the decision to inherit his father's estate or start anew with us... he chose the former. He didn't realize he wouldn't receive the benefits of his father's death if he was associated with the people that killed him. There were too many Leonard loyalists... they wouldn't have stood for it."

"Just like the loyalists after my father died too..." Tony sighed, kneading his forehead with his fingers.

"A change in leadership is always hard for those following. I learned that the hard way myself... but through the years I've earned my place, just as you earned yours."

Tony shakes his head as he continues to leaf through the papers. "Why wouldn't you come to me with this sooner. After all these years... why now?"

"Because you'll listen now. I helped save your life, you owe me one Stark. You're welcome by the

way.”

Tony chuckled. “Dom did tell me you helped. How’d you know the facility anyway? One of yours?”

Fury shrugged and sighed. “It was one of the few Hydra was able to acquire, yes.”

Tony goes page by page, fascinated by the history held in this one folder. A history that was well hidden from him for his entire life. Either Fury was damn good at forging and photoshopping, or this was real. The three men in the kitchen with him kept silent, letting him absorb the information for as long as he needed. He’d never realized Fury could be so patient.

But one particular picture had him pausing altogether. It was a small 3x3 portrait clipped to the corner of a file not unlike the ones he has for all his own soldiers.

“Mom?” He looks up at Fury. “My mother worked with you?”

Fury nodded. “Yes. A spy, and a damned good one. She had your father fooled near instantly.”

Tony stared at her picture. She looked so young... and she looked happy. “This--this can’t be possible. My mother... no my mother can’t be a spy.” He shook his head violently. There was just no way. “She was--she was too innocent. My father forced her into a marriage then killed her family.”

‘She didn’t join us until after she was forced to marry your father... But do you really think the only daughter of Henry Carbonell would have been innocent?’ Fury actually chuckled.

Tony’s gaze hardened. “No. She was a good person. She wouldn’t have hurt anybody. She wasn’t one of us. She was *good*.”

“She *was* good. Very good. Being able to deceive her genius son, even years after she’s gone, is proof enough of how *good* she was at her job. No one but her would have been able to handle your father the way she did.”

Tony pushes away from the counter violently, bar stool squealing and clattering as it was pushed to the floor by the force of Tony’s sudden movements.

“Then why the hell didn’t you pull her out?!” He yelled at Fury. “You had to know what he was doing to her! You put her in danger! You should have pulled her out!”

All Tony could think about were the countless nights that could have been avoided. His mother’s cries and apologies begged on his behalf. The heavy makeup, the dark glasses, and the long sleeve blouses to cover the events of the night before. The nights when his mother would come to his defence, only to receive a harsher punishment than Tony would have ever had to endure.

“She could have been *killed*. He could have killed her.”

There was that pity on Fury’s face again. He hated this damn man. To the core.

“We tried Stark. *I* tried... but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Why the hell not?!” Tony shouted.

“She refused to leave *you*.”

Tony’s body went taut. His lungs felt like they’d been shrunk in half... because that meant it was

all his fault.

Fury kept talking. "And we would've pulled you out with her, but your father was obsessed with you. He would've torn down the city to find you and he would've found you... and when he did he wouldn't be forgiving."

"My father was never forgiving," Tony mutters. He can feel the pull of heat behind his eye.

"I know, and I still regret to this day not at least trying to pull you and your mother away. You two could have started a new life, away from him, but--"

"But my father would have found me no matter how far you sent us." Tony sat back down on another barstool and covered his face with his hand.

"Yes..." Fury nods his head. "Your mother saw the signs even when you were an infant. Her reports were always long and voiced her worry about you and the unhealthy attachment he held for you. He'd hold you for hours, and refused to let your mother touch you even when you were hungry and screaming." Tony felt disgusted listening... "She thought your birth had driven him insane. She wrote one report specifically about it..." Fury gently moved a few papers aside on the folder to reveal a marked paper of his mother's many letters back to Fury and Tony felt his throat tighten as he read along with every word Fury said. "She woke up one night to find him in the living room holding you, rocking in the chair, singing. The wording she used..." Fury's face puckered and his expression steeled with a mixture of worry and confusion. "It made his actions sound borderline psychotic... Howard never let you out of his sight." Tony's hand became shaky as his body became riddled with tremors, like a chill spilling down his bones.

"He was a troubled man," Tony forced out as he skimmed the letter, the more he read about his father and himself as a young boy. About the times in the shop that he was vaguely able to remember... His father never went anywhere without him. *Nowhere*. Not even when he went on a job.

Apparently his first murder wasn't witnessed when he was four like he remembered... It was before he could even talk.

"Your mother was worried, like I said... because your father wasn't the only one with the unhealthy attachment," Fury gave him a pointed look. "You refused to leave his side..." Tony flinched.

Well, if that didn't sound familiar...

The mention of his undying loyalty to his abusive father irked him; it bothered him, and he couldn't shake the slimy feeling of disgust.

"The plan had always been to end the Stark line with you--"

"You were going to kill me?"

"At first, yes. Your mother was to raise you differently. You were going to be the first Stark in a long time that had a mother; a proper one. But your father was too involved and you were young enough to still believe that your father could do no wrong. You wouldn't have come willingly, but your mother begged for more time. She promised that you'd grow up and change the Stark name for the better."

"Do you think she was right?" Tony felt like a child asking. Like he was searching for some kind of approval from this man he didn't even know.

"I like to think she was." Fury smiled.

Down in Tony's shop, Harley was worrying a hole in the floor with his pacing. He knew who that man was. He wasn't an idiot.

"JARVIS--" he started again, only for the AI to interrupt him before his question could be asked again.

"Your father is fine, Master Harley. Just as he was the last time you asked. The discussion is civil and your father has stopped showing any sign of concern with their presence as they now begin to discuss other matters of business. I will let you know if the situation progresses."

Pepper stands from the sofa with a loud sigh.

"Well if it's civil, tell Tony we're coming up. He can move to his office if he wants privacy, but it's time for breakfast."

"Yes ma'am."

Peter's the first up the stairs. He's still wrapped in his bright blue shark towel as he darts into the kitchen in search of Tony, and by the time Pepper and Harley join with Morgan, Peter's already climbed his way into his father's lap, hugging him around the neck tight.

The two men continue their conversation like they were never interrupted, and Pepper invites Clint and Coulson to join them at the table for breakfast while the other two talk business at the breakfast bar.

"I think you need to make a statement," Fury says. Tony shakes his head, accepting the plate of pancakes Pepper slid towards him for Peter.

"I have to disagree." He nudges the boy to get his attention and guides a forkful of pancake into his open mouth. Fury watches them closely.

"Tony, people think you're dead and it's causing quite the uproar. I think you need to make an appearance of some sort."

Tony looks up to glare at him. "For what? So they can schedule my new court hearing so we can start this process all over again? No thanks. I never make the same mistake twice."

Fury sighs. "Whatever you think is best, I suppose. I'm not going to get in your way. You and your family have been through a lot..."

"Yes, and we deserve some peace for once. My men know I'm alive and that's enough," Tony snaps pointedly, guiding another bite into Peter's mouth. "So, I'm going to keep quiet.... For now."

Fury hums. "Very well, but remember our deal Stark. I'll be calling you."

Tony smiles a sickly sweet smile. "And I'll be letting it go to voicemail. Thanks for stopping by. I'm keeping this by the way." He lifts the worn out folder then places it back down on the counter beside himself. He'd go through it a bit more thoroughly later. "Don't forget about Norman." He casts Fury a pointed look. "I need him taken care of, *completely*."

"My men are already on it, Stark. They're convening at the Tower to collect a few materials," Fury assures. "Oscorp won't be making any more trouble for us."

“Good.”

Peter turns around fully to remind his father of his breakfast since he seemed to have gotten distracted and he caught a glimpse of the man’s whole face. Peter’s mouth falls open and a wide smile follows a happy gasp.

“You’ve got an eyepatch! Are you a pirate? Do you not have an eye like my Daddy?” Then he turns to look at his father. “Why don’t you have a cool eyepatch like that?”

Tony huffed in disbelief. “I do have an eyepatch. See.” He points to the gauze taped to his face using an ugly medical patch. Peter wrinkles his nose.

“It’s not cool though.”

“Quiet you,” Tony jokes, pushing more food into the kids mouth to keep him quiet. Fury just laughs at him.

“See you around Stark. Nice to finally meet your boys.” He nods once at Peter then turns to do the same to Harley. Harley nods back with a glare. He succumbs to Clint’s coaxing and engages in the practiced handshake they made up back in Italy as an official goodbye. He glared at Fury’s back his whole trek towards the front door.

He turns back to face his father once all three men leave only to find the man frowning at him in disapproval.

“What?” He can hear his voice rise in pitch slightly under the scrutiny.

“What was all that about?” Tony nods towards the closed side door and Harley turns away to stare down at his empty plate.

“Nothing,” he shrugs.

Tony grunts. “He’s earned my trust... for now. He’s a partner. You can think whatever you want in your head, but you’re going to show him the proper respect from now on.”

“What?!” Harley growls. “He’s evil! He tried killing you, don’t you remember?”

Tony gives him a pointed look. “We aren’t going to discuss this any further. I’m not arguing with you. I’ve met my aggravation quota for the day.”

Harley slumps in his seat. “Fine.”

He doesn’t see it, but Tony cracks a small smile, looking at him and Pepper gives him a knowing look.

“Finish your breakfast, we’re gonna head back down to the shop for a few hours.” Harley perked up.

“Me too?!” Peter asks eagerly.

Harley noticeably deflates just a little, surrendering a sigh as he picks up his plate to carry to the sink.

“Not today pal. You’re gonna hang with Mama and Morgan today, okay.”

Peter pouts, but Tony doesn’t give in. He’s spent countless one on one time with Peter over the

past month and nearly none with Harley. This was the first step in helping his eldest heal.

Speaking of healing....

Therapy went off without a hitch...

That's what Tony wanted to be able to say.

Dr. Cherry said it was a normal response to first time sessions, but Tony supposed he must have been expecting some magical transformation after one evening with her. She was *supposed* to be some supposed Miracle Worker.

Peter insisted on both him and Pepper sitting in with him, which Dr. Cherry actually endorsed, but the only downside was Peter refused to speak to her and instead it became more of a consultation between him and Pepper and Dr. Cherry about *what* Peter has been up to and what events have appeared most worrying in the past month.

Harley was the complete opposite. Even when Dr. Cherry suggested inviting at least one of them to sit in with him as support, Harley adamantly refused and bolted into the room.

For both, Dr. Cherry's conclusions were the same. The boys sat in the waiting room as the adults discussed proper handling procedures.

"The boy's need stability." That was her firmest point. "They need reassurance that neither of you are going anywhere. I know that is a hard promise for you to make in your line of work, Mr. Stark, but after this incident both of their biggest fears are losing you two."

"We already knew that Doc." Tony huffed. "The reason we came here is to figure out how to get rid of that fear and codependency."

Dr. Cherry frowned at him. "You can't expect your children to get over a traumatizing event like this overnight, Mr. Stark. It will take time to heal."

"He doesn't mean it like that, Dr. Cherry." Pepper quickly amended. "We both have just been really worried about the boys. It's been difficult and we want to help them the best we can."

Dr. Cherry sighed and handed them both a paper with a long list of book titles. "I'd recommend buying and reading a couple books about helping a child cope with trauma. These are more rare and very specific circumstances so keep in mind that you may not find a perfect fit. For now I've also made a list of what you two can do. From what I've heard from you so far you've done a good job, and you're to be commended." She pauses and gives them both a meaningful look. "And don't blame yourself for what happened. The children will pick up on the guilt and it will prolong their healing."

Tony felt like she was staring directly at him as she said this.

"With Peter, I'd keep doing what you're doing. I know you two recently had a new baby and you were right to try and have Peter sleep on his own on occasion. It's good for him to have a full night's sleep, but if he continues having constant fits like the ones you described I'd advise taking turns with your daughter and Peter a couple times a week. Peter can choose one parent to sleep with him while the other sleeps in your room with your daughter, and you can switch it up the next night. Also, try to help Peter understand that he will have to go back to sleep on his own at some point. He needs to get in his mind that it isn't going to be a permanent situation. It doesn't have to stop this week, or this month even, but I'd recommend that next month you try having him sleep

alone at least once a week.”

“That’s... actually a pretty good idea.” Tony nods.

“I’m glad you approve,” Dr. Cherry chuckled before continuing. “Give him as much affection as he asks for, and try to encourage conversation about how he’s feeling. And it’d be wise to once in a while discuss the events of the trauma so he can learn to accept them. Don’t lie to him, and don’t avoid the topics he might bring up, but use caution. There are some things he doesn’t need to know about. Talk about your feelings on what happened so he understands that his apprehension and fears are normal and okay, and if he acts out try not to be too harsh. It’s normal for a child his age to become prone towards irritable outbursts after an event like this, so go easy on him, he’s just learning how to process his own feelings about what happened.”

Tony feels a sudden rise of guilt bubble in his stomach, and he bows his head to stare at the paper to appear busy reading. Perhaps he hadn’t been so snappy with Peter that morning, but the way the kid had been so outright cruel towards Morgan, it made his blood boil. He couldn’t just let him get away with saying something so hateful... but maybe he should have. He’d have to buy all of these books and stay up during one of Morgan’s bad nights and just *read*. Pepper, ever aware, grabs his hand and squeezes, leaning against him and wrapping an arm around his shoulder in a non conspicuous manner to also provide some reassurance.

“Now as for Harley...” The Doctor sighs, “just give him as much attention as possible. That boy needs it.”

Tony laughed at the irony. “I wish that’d work. The kid’s determined to be as self-sustainable as possible.”

“Adolescents do not like to show vulnerability, Mr. Stark, and that includes asking for help. He may try to act as if he is doing fine even though he’s not. He’ll probably resist affection for a while, especially being the one to initiate it even when he feels the need. It’s hard with teens because they think they’re grown and they don’t need our help, but they do.”

God, if that didn’t sound like Harley.

“He didn’t say much to me during our session, and I don’t expect him to anytime soon. It might help if you two tried speaking to him regularly about what happened, either together or separately. Discuss it with him like you are equals, and maybe do it while playing a game or during an activity he enjoys, he might be more likely to open up.”

Tony turns towards Pepper. “I can use our time in the shop to try and talk. He loves it down there.” He smiles at the prospect of being able to help.

“Perfect, is Harley more comfortable talking with Mom or Dad?” Dr. Cherry looks between the both of them. Tony doesn’t know the answer though, so he turns to Pepper but she doesn’t seem to know either.

“Pepper.” Tony immediately says.

Pepper nods her agreement, squeezing Tony’s hand and offering an apologetic smile. “He doesn’t like talking to Tony about his feelings--”

“Or the hugging thing,” Tony mutters, and Pepper thinks she might hear a bit of resentment in his tone.

“Well that’s up to you to fix, Dad. It’s usually hard for teenage boys to open up to their father’s,

especially with a father of your reputation.” Cherry shoots him a strong look before she continues. “Whether you agree with me or not, Stark, it is imperative that Harley knows you won’t think any less of him for showing or expressing emotions like fear or sadness.”

Tony scowls at her. “Of course I won’t think any less of him. Why do you think I’m here right now?” His anger boils at her insinuation.

“Good.” She approves with a nod. “The relationship between father and son is just as important as a boy’s relationship with his mother.”

Pepper smiles at him, squeezing his hand again to try and uplift him a little bit. “Harley and Tony *are* very close. Harley’s had a lot of issues with men in the past and that created some issues in the past, but I think Tony’s been able to initiate more emotional talks with Harley than I have. Harley just tends to be more comfortable bringing it up himself with me. It has nothing to do with Tony, don’t be mistaken about that. He’s been particularly distanced with *both* of us recently.” Pepper’s voice takes on a hard edge as she speaks to Dr. Cherry and the woman smiles at her with a hint of pride.

“That’s very good to hear,” Tony looks up with a scowl. He wasn’t very fond of shrinks for this very reason. They thought they knew everything about him because of his name, but they *didn’t*. “It is common for adolescents to distance themselves from family and avoid discussing their feelings regarding what happened, and he will need help learning to feel comfortable about these more emotions. These are just the beginning stages, and Harley is a very good kid who’s already been through a lot. In his case, this distancing may play into him trying to indirectly help you with Peter and your daughter by not causing as much trouble for you. So, just keep a close lookout for any signs of depression or any significant mood swings.”

“Harley’s always had mood swings,” Tony scoffs, “it won’t be much of a change.”

“Well why do you think that is, Mr. Stark?” Dr. Cherry raises a brow. “He’s already had his fair share of trauma like your wife said. Even before these events. But if you give him time to heal, nurture him and show him you care and love him, then he will get better.”

“And he did get better,” Pepper points out. “Just before everything happened, I could tell Harley was doing better. At first I thought it was because of that incident, and he was just scared to disappoint us” she looked at Tony with a slight wince and he knew instantly what incident she was referring to because he noticed the near instant change after that as well, “but maybe it was because we were helping him heal.” Pepper lifts a hand to her mouth as her smile grows and she leaned against Tony’s side.

Dr. Cherry smiled. “Yes, and he can heal again. Now, I think this was a very productive session. I hope maybe we can reschedule for next week.”

Tony nods, sitting up further in his chair, eager and ready to sign whatever paperwork she handed his way.

“There’s nothing you need to do Mr. Stark except get them here,” Dr. Cherry chuckled. “Would you like me to schedule for the same time and day?”

“Yes, that would be good, thank you.” Pepper answers. She stands and drags Tony out of his seat as well. “Thank you so much Dr. Cherry.

“You’re welcome. Let me walk you out.”

She stands to walk them towards the door leading out into the waiting room.

“Oh, one small thing,” her hand rests on the doorknob and she lowers her voice slightly. “I want you both to keep in mind something. Childhood trauma doesn’t develop from the event itself... it only becomes a problem when the child is forced to deal with it on their own. No matter how big or how small, children need someone to help them process their feelings. So just be there for them whenever they need, and even when they don’t, and they will be fine. This won’t define them for the rest of their life.” She smiles at them to reassure them and Pepper smiles gratefully, and Dr. Cherry opens the door.

They’re met with a sobbing Peter curled in Harley’s arms.

“Look!” Harley quickly exclaims in relief, jostling Peter in his arms. “Look Mom and Dad are back, see? They’re fine.”

“Oh baby,” Pepper coos, rushing forward to scoop Peter into her arms and rock him gently from side to side.

Harley stands as well, assuming they were about to leave, but as soon as he was on his feet he was pulled into a strong embrace. His face smushed against his father's dress shirt as the man held him tight.

Harley wiggles a bit in discomfort, straining against the embrace to cast a look towards the therapist. “What’d she say to you?” He questions skeptically with just a hint of suspicion.

“Nothing,” Tony mutters, beginning to rock them side to side. “Just let me hold you for a minute, okay?” He didn’t know why he felt guilty. He shouldn’t. Dr. Cherry was simply speaking out to ensure Harley’s best interest, but just the thought of his actions somehow deterring Harley from confiding in him, had him bothered in a way he’d never been before. So he just holds the kid tight and hopes that it might make up for whatever mistakes he might have made in the past.

Harley doesn’t protest any more and even wraps his arms around Tony in return. Then his mother was behind him, embracing him with her other arm, smushing both Peter and Harley between their parents. He felt a kiss be pressed to the top of his head and he wasn’t sure if it was his Mom or Dad, but he didn’t care.

“I’ll see both you boys again next week. Your parents and I scheduled a second appointment.” The family slowly pulls apart. Tony keeps his arm wrapped around Harley’s shoulders though, and Pepper keeps her hold on Peter. “So, until then, both of you have a bit of homework.”

Peter looks up and sniffles.

“Peter, every day I want you to try and be in your room by yourself for a few minutes. And while you’re in there I want you to draw a picture. Anything you want. And if you don’t feel comfortable one day to go in your room by yourself, you can sit with your parents, but when you do, I want you to draw two pictures instead of one. Then next time we see each other, you bring all your pictures and we can talk about what you drew. Deal?”

Peter smiles, and nods his head quickly before dropping it back down to rest on his mother’s shoulder.

“Good. And Harley, your assignment is a bit more difficult, but I think you can handle it... Two times this week I want you to sit down with anybody you feel comfortable with and talk about your feelings, and *you* need to be the one who approaches them.”

Harley grimaced.

“I know, you don’t like that,” Dr. Cherry teased, “but I think you’ll find that you enjoy it. It can be two different people, or the same person. It can be your parents or maybe a close friend. But next time you come I want you to tell me who the person is and just give me a short summary of what the two of you talked about. Do you think you can do that?”

Harley grunted and nodded with a roll of his eyes.

“Alright good, Mom and Dad will help you both with your assignments,” she casted a look to both Pepper and Tony.

“We got it Doc,” Tony gives her a thumbs up.

They all say goodbye and make a break for the car in the parking lot. It was pouring rain outside and Peter giggled as they ran through the rain, splashing through puddles gathered in the dips of the parking lot. By the time they were all seated safely in the car, they were gasping for breaths through the laughter, soaked to the bone.

“Alright let’s get home and maybe watch a movie. Uncle Happy’s probably waiting to be relieved of his babysitting duties.”

That night, lying in bed, Tony couldn’t sleep. Peter was lying between them as per usual and Morgan was knocked out peacefully in her bedside sleeper beside Pepper who was reading a book by the soft lamp light illuminated on her nightstand. So, Tony rolls onto his side to face her.

“Hey, Pep,” he whispers, only receiving a lift of her brows to signify that she was indeed listening. “Remember when Dr. Cherry brought up that whole ‘stability’ thing?” She nodded her head and flipped a page.

“Well, what if she wasn’t only talking about the whole dying situation?”

Pepper sighs and lowers her book to her lap, placing in the bookmark and setting it aside.

“Tony, don’t read into it so much. Dr. Cherry was very blunt, I doubt she had any hidden meanings in what she said.”

“No, I mean, what if she didn’t even know?” Tony rambled quickly. Pepper quirked an unamused brow. “When we gave her Harley and Peter’s information, we gave them our last name. She doesn’t know about the whole ongoing adoption situation.”

“Tony,” she starts carefully, reaching out to grip his hand, “we already adopted them, remember. That’s why I had to go to the Tower that day... I had to finalize everything.”

“I know, I know, but the boys don’t know about it yet. So-so what if this stability thing also has to do with them doubting that this is their forever home and that they’re ours... I know Peter doesn’t think like that. I doubt he even really grasps the idea of adoption, but I’m more concerned about Harley.”

“Okay, I see what you mean,” Pepper nods, “but I don’t think Harley really doubts us regarding that.”

“Maybe not consciously. Maybe he needs that physical proof of stability though.”

“Well, do you want to tell him tomorrow then?” Pepper asks.

“I know we wanted to wait until a lot of other things have blown over so it isn’t overwhelming, but I think this will help them heal a bit more. To sorta officially disown the bastards responsible for all the shit they’ve gone through.”

“I’m all for it Honey,” Pepper smiles, reaching out to stroke his cheek, then a quick kiss.

“Ok great,” Tony sits up with a grin, “I’m gonna go down to the shop to finish their presents.” He begins to gently throw off the blankets draped over his legs.

“Wait, Tony, no,” Pepper calls out with a hissed whisper. “You are not going to spend the whole night down there. You can finish it in the morning.”

“No, Harley will want to go down there with me if I go in the morning. Don’t worry, I’ll be back up here before midnight.”

“JARVIS, hear that? You make sure he’s on time.” Pepper instructs.

“Yes ma’am. I will make sure sir is punctual for his turn in caring for the young Ms.”

Tony turns out to be a couple minutes late for bed, but Pepper didn’t know any better. Everything was set for the next morning...

Yet despite all his confidence and preparation, Tony found himself growing nervous. He sat on the couch, staring at the blank TV screen as he ran through the script in his head over and over while he bottle fed Morgan her morning milk. The boys were in the kitchen helping Pepper make waffles for breakfast.

He turned his head down to stare at the small folder lying on the coffee table, then at the two inconspicuous boxes on the side table beside him. His fingers twitch and Morgan grunts in irritation when it moves the bottle in her mouth.

“Sorry sweet girl, Daddy’s just a bit nervous,” he whispers, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “I know there’s no reason to be... but I just am.” He chuckles at the idiocy of it all. He was one of history’s best crime boss’ on the planet. He’s killed countless people in equally countless excruciating ways. He’s been kidnapped and tortured multiple times since he was a child, and here he is, nervous to tell his two sons that the paperwork had officially gone through and they were his... It was odd how the human brain operated.

When it came time, after everyone finished their breakfast, Tony awkwardly announced that they should all sit together in the Living room for no particular reason. Pepper smirked at him, amused by his anxiousness, and Halrey gave him a dubious look as he slowly took a seat in the place Tony had ushered him.

“What’s going on?” He asked while Tony rushed over to settle Morgan in her bassinet to the side of the room. He rushed back towards the couch and took a seat beside Pepper.

“Well, we have something important to tell you boys,” Pepper says, grinning down at Peter beside her when the boy hugged her side.

Harley only continued to look suspicious.

Pepper reaches forward for the folder, but Tony jumps in before she could grab it. “Actually, I kinda want to give them their gifts first.” He smiles boyishly and Peter perks up at the mention of

presents.

“Presents?”

“Yes, they’re custom made by yours truly,” Tony reaches over towards the end table and grabs both packages. Handing the slimmer one to Peter and the bigger one to Harley.

“Why’s his bigger?” Peter pouts, looking between both the gifts.

“Because he’s bigger than you,” Tony excused quickly with a dismissive wave of his hand, which seemed to appease the boy for the moment. “Go ahead and open it.”

Instead of opening his, Harley sat to watch Peter open his first. The boy grins when he sees what was inside, clearly unaware of the significance of the gift but excited all the same. He lifts the blade carelessly from the package, brandishing it in the air and Pepper is quick to grab hold of his wrist before he could poke his eye out, or hers.

“Careful baby, it’s very sharp.” She pushes his hand down slowly then lets go. Tony winces.

“Maybe I should have held off on attaching the blade...” he mutters, and Pepper gives him a ‘look’ that confirms his speculation.

Peter stares at the slim knife, twisting it carefully in his hands to study it. The handle itself was a deep red with shaded web-like patterns decorating it and the blade itself was shiny and black.

“Wha’ssit for?” He asks, lips pursing together in confusion.

“It’s a throwing knife,” Tony answers, and when Peter immediately lifts his arm, pulling his wrist back to throw, Tony jumps forward with a frantic rectification of words, but Pepper stops Peter’s arm just in time. “No-no-no kiddo, don’t throw it now. It’s for when you’re older or I decide to accept Natasha’s offer and let her show you how it’s done.”

Pepper interrupts him with a sharp frown. “If anyone would be showing him how to throw a knife first, it would be me. Look Peter,” she shifts to grab the handle of a short blade fit snugly in the holster she wore beneath her shirt. “Mommy’s got one just like yours.” Her’s was longer and a bit slimmer, and the handle was a swirl of deep gold and dark blue, but otherwise it was nearly similar.

“You just carry that around under your pajamas?” Harley exclaims.

Pepper smiles. “Of course. It’s good to always be prepared.” She shoots a small look towards Tony. “And your father made it and gave it to me on our wedding day. I wear it like I do the ring.”

“Classy, Dad,” Harley laughed.

Tony shrugged. “Hey, she liked the knife more than the ring. I consider it a win.”

“He knows how to woo a girl, that’s for sure.” Pepper smiles, pulling back the first layer of silk Peter’s knife had been resting on in the box. “Here Peter. This is a tiny holster. It’ll fit under your arm right here,” she pokes him in the side and he shrieks with a small giggle. “You can try it on after Harley opens his gift.”

“Is mine a knife too?” Harley scoffs with a tight smile as he stares down at the unopened box.

“Maybe, maybe not. Either way I can guarantee you’ll love it.”

“C’mon Harley!” Peter encourages, bouncing on the cushions in excitement.

Harley slowly opens the box, pulling back the thin sheet of blood red satin. He gasps at what lies inside. It was the prettiest pistol he’d ever seen. He’d never seen a gun anything like it. The craftsmanship was outstanding.

He picked it up carefully. It was heavy in his hands. The dark wood of the pistol grip is ingrained with specks of gold foil. There was a tiny gold plate at the bottom holding an embellished spade shape at its center. The barrel was a dark yet shiny metal, textured with intricate, leafy designs surrounding three curvy letters.

“Has?” Harley tilts his head in confusion as he stares down at the three letters. They had to be important if they were presented among such an artsy designs. It couldn’t be a name brand... because his Dad said he made them himself.

“They’re your initials. Peter has it on his too, and so does your mother. I guess it’s a bit of tradition now,” Tony chuckles a bit nervously, reaching for the folder. Peter turns to look down at his gift and Pepper turns over the knife to reveal the tiny engraving along the handle. Harley looks down at his own and frowns. He could understand HBS... Harley Ben Stark. But it was HAS. That meant either Tony got his middle name wrong... or it had been changed too in Tony’s mind to erase any part of his old father.

“Here,” Tony says, sliding the now opened folder towards him. “It became official a few weeks ago. We’ve been meaning to tell you both for a while now... but you’re officially Harley Antonio Stark.” Harley stared at the document... Tony gave him not only his last name, but his first? It made his throat tighten.

“And Peter... you’re officially Peter Virginio Stark.”

Harley looks towards his brother... their Mom’s name. Peter got their Mom’s name and he got his Dad’s. He didn’t want them to see his red eyes, because he knew they had to be. He was trying way too hard not to cry for them not to be. He runs his fingertips along the smooth wood of his gift, then the metal, skimming over the small yet so so significant bunch of letters.

“You actually did it?” Harley eventually asked. “E-even though you didn’t need to no more.”

“Of course. That was always the plan, Ace.” Tony leans forward, placing his hand on the boy’s knee and giving it a strong squeeze.

“We... this is what you wanted right?”

Harley admits he should’ve been a bit more careful when he shoves the gun back into the box and tosses it aside to barrel into his father for a strong hug. It startles Tony a bit at first, but he recovers and squeezes the kid as tight as he could manage.

“Thank you,” Harley cried, sobs wracking his body as he slowly crawled up onto the seat beside his Dad to lean fully against him and hide his face against the man’s shoulder.

He feels a heavy weight land on them and he looks up to see Peter draped over both their bodies with a concerned frown, hand reaching out to pet Harley’s hair in an effort to comfort him. He releases a wet chuckle and tugs Peter down to hug him close too.

“I never thought I’d get to have a family again. Thank you guys.”

Tony holds both of them close and Pepper sidles up beside them.

“Well I never expected I could father three kids, but here we all are.” Tony jokes, resting his cheek on Harley’s hair as Pepper combed through Peter’s. “And who knows, maybe one day it will be four.” He winks at his wife and Pepper scoffs.

“No. I believe three is quite enough, thank you.”

Tony laughs and so does Harley, and soon all four of them are giggling hysterically, drowning in the joy of the moment.

“You know,” Tony gasps out with a heavy breath when they’ve all finally calmed down. “I made you a custom holster too,” he gestures towards Harley’s box. “Why don’t you boys try them on.”

“Yeah!” Peter exclaims, scrambling back towards his box to pull out the strips of leather. He hands them to his mother, standing from the couch and waits for her to strap it to him. Harley, on the other hand, looks between the two separate pieces.

“Two?” He looks at Tony for confirmation.

“It depends on the event.” He leans forward and reaches out his hand to hold one and explain.

“This one is just to help hide it in your waistband, but if you were to accompany me to any particular event, this one would fit well beneath a suit jacket. It fits just like Peter’s does,” he gestures towards Peter, where the leather straps were now wrapped around his shoulder to hang the actual holster against the side of his waist. “When your collection gets bigger as you grow up I’ll make a few different options... Happy’s got five different ones on his person at all times practically. I don’t recommend going to that extreme though,” he chuckles.

Harley tries on the single shoulder holster and he grins, staring down at the protruding grip of his new pistol. Tony’s not sure whether he’s proud or worried that his son is so excited, but he’s just happy to see him smile so much for the first time in a while.

“I thought I was gonna have to wait until I was thirty before I got one of these,” Harley nearly squeals. His body seemed on the verge of vibrating as he twisted and turned trying to catch the pistol and his holster in a different light.

“Well that was the plan at first,” Tony chuckled quietly. “But I realized that maybe I was being a bit *too* protective...”

“Are you saying--” Harley gasped, mouth dropping open.

“Yes,” Tony sighs, “I think it’s time you started *proper* training. But you’ll be training with me--”

“Oh my god!”

“But it will not be easy. It won’t be like what you’ve done before. My methods are more strenuous and harsher than Happy’s. If you’re serious about doing this then I won’t be lenient.”

Harley nods his head quickly and adamantly.

“You’ll join Happy’s class occasionally when I’m busy, but a few months with me and you’ll be leaps and bounds ahead of any of those assholes.” Tony smirks proudly.

Pepper sighs and rolls her eyes. “Why don’t we spend the day together and play a board game and at least *pretend* to be a normal family for just a little while?”

“Clue!” Peter instantly shouts, darting towards the game closet before any more discussion could

be had.

Monday of next week Bruce clears him to leave the house. He wears the first prototype of his prosthetic that he and Harley worked vigorously to finish that weekend. The movements worked seamlessly. The hardest part had been manipulating the neural transmitters in his brain to communicate with the sensors in the arm. He wore a glove and long sleeves to see it could pass as a normal functioning arm without drawing suspicion

Peter had not been so happy about his planned absence and he threw quite a feverish fit that morning before he left, nearly making himself sick again. Tony hated leaving him, and he hated leaving Morgan and Harley too. Morgan would have cared less about his absence, but Harley was clearly not thrilled with him leaving either but he didn't voice his opinion, unlike his brother who was busy screaming bloody murder in the room over.

They'd even called Dr. Cherry that morning to ask the recommended course of action. He didn't know if it would be considered "traumatizing" if he just left while Peter was clearly in distress.

She made a good point.... He'd have to leave for work at some point, today might as well have been that point.

So Tony sulked around the construction zone all morning. It didn't help that he was completely exhausted from the past few nights. Morgan hasn't gotten over her colic, and last night had been Pepper's night to sleep in Peter's room so it was all up to him last night.

"You alright man?" He felt a slap against his back

"Nice to see you too, Rhodey. I see progress is finally coming along."

Rhodey turns his gaze towards the nearly finished construction zone with a proud smile. The workers were putting the finishing touches on the building and beginning work on the landscaping. Tony can only imagine what it will look like all finished. It already looked damn impressive the way it was.

"It's taken long enough. We've been talking about doing this for years."

Tony nods, watching as the workers rush around like busy ants to finish the project on schedule. "I figured now was as good a time as any. After the attack on the Tower... this will be a safer place for HQ. Plus it's closer to home." He's jarred for a moment after he says that word.

Since when did he start considering that safe house his home? That was never the plan. It was just a secluded little cabin he could recover in, but after nearly two months there in the little lake house... it seems more like home than the Tower ever had. Like they were back in Italy.

"So I guess that means you've decided to stay where you are, huh?" Rhodey muses, interrupting his own little realization. "Pepper's been hinting at it the few times I've seen her. I'm glad things are finally working out for you like you deserve Tones."

Tony smiles at his friend. "Thanks Rhodey. That means a lot."

Tony continues his day with Rhodey at the site. At some point Happy accompanies them as Tony makes any last minute rectifications to the plan. If all goes according to that plan, the Compound should be ready for reveal by the end of next week...

And quite the reveal it was.

“Woah!” Harley exclaimed.

Tony had just given them permission to open their eyes as he marched them up towards the edge of the property. Even Pepper looked shocked and she’d seen and worked on the plans herself.

Peter sat on top of his shoulders and he could hear him gasp dramatically to match his brother. Tony *loved* that they loved it. He points out a few of the many different buildings dotting the landscape. “Those are the barracks over there. That’s the hanger for a new line of tactical jets I’m working on. Also, of course, a massive workshop off of the garage... and at the top, above the common quarters.” He points at the top of the large building at the center of it all. Their name emblazoned on the front, just like the Tower. “Is the penthouse if we ever feel the need to spend the night.”

“Wow.” Harley only says again, turning in a slow circle to take it all in.

They all stood on the freshly sodded lawn, so the grass was perfectly manicured. *Everything* was just perfect.

Tony wraps his new arm around Harley’s shoulder, tugging him up against his side while he continues to use his other hand to keep Peter balanced on his shoulders.

“I was thinking of calling it the Stark Compound,” Tony announces dramatically, grinning. “What do you think?”

Harley’s mouth opens, but Peter beats him to the punch.

“I think i’s badass.” He states impishly.

Tony gasps, and Pepper chokes on a shocked laugh.

“*What* did you just say?” Tony wasn’t sure he heard correctly.

Peter grips his nicely manicured hair, and Tony could hear Peter’s grin in the manic little giggle he released because the boy *knows* he said a bad word.

“I say i’s bad ASS!”

Tony grins in amusement and Pepper smacked his arm.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself, kid.”

Howard stares out the window of his office as he waits. He holds a tumbler of whiskey in one hand and an imported Nicaraguan cigar in his other; a gift. The night was dark, but the city was lively as always. It really was the city that never sleeps... and he smiled at the prospect of chaos that was about to ensue.

There was a hollow knock on his door and he smiled.

“Come in.”

The door opens and he turns, greeted with a sight he’d waited many days to see.

“Thank you Agent Barnes. You are dismissed.” The scruffy man turns, stomping out of the room without a word. His movements were a bit robotic and his conversational skills were still a work in progress, but he followed instructions *very* well, and Howard had a feeling he’d grow to like him

quite a bit, but he would need time before he went out in public once again. For now, that could wait.

“President Ross.” Howard addressed with a cold smile, placing down the glass on his desk as he approached the man, gagged and tied, kneeling on his floor. “It’s good to see you.” He kneels down in front of him, lifting a hand to place his index finger beneath the man’s chin and lifts his gaze up to meet his. “Are you ready to face your people one last time?”

He turns to look at the set up of cameras and crew across the room, prepared for his big exhibition, and Ross’ head snaps over to look as well. He frantically shakes his head when he pieces it together, whatever desperate pleas he’s uttering muffled behind the gag stuffed in his mouth.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.” Howard laughed, grabbing him and hauling him closer to the cameras, then he addressed his crew. “Do you have the footage of Anthony’s little incident prepared for afterwards?” They all nod.

“Good. Now place the lighting and let’s get this started.” He smiles, placing the cigar in his mouth for a quick puff, and he swiftly unties the gag around the soon to be *former* President’s mouth.

“Stark,” he gasped as soon as he was free, “why are you doing this?”

Howard doesn’t look at him, lifting his chin so his face can be pampered with powder by a woman dressed in a skimpy skirt. “Anthony knows you work for me now... I have no use for you anymore.”

“Cameras rolling in 3...2...--”

Ross begins to struggle and Howard lifts his hand to grip the back of his neck in warning, and the man goes silent.

“Anthony,” Howard drawls, face casted over by a dark shadow, “I’m glad to see you’re still alive...”

The speech continues just as he practiced, without any hiccups. All that needed to be said was said, and now only one last thing on the docket.

“The most powerful man in the country. The man you people have put your trust into,” he reaches over to grab a fistful of Ross’ hair, “under my control. Defenseless against me and *my* power... nothing, and nobody can protect you from me. Not even Anthony Stark.” He grins.

He doesn’t even feel it when he pulls the trigger or the jerk that follows it... he supposed his hand had gone numb after years of this very thing. But at least he could still feel the warm splatter of blood that coated his hand afterwards; that was the most enjoyable part.

He takes another puff of his cigar.

“But maybe *he* can...” He gestures forward, towards the camera, and the feed cuts.

“I can’t believe he did this,” Tony scowls as he and Rhodey rush through the back halls of the Tower. He fixes his tie as they go, and Rhodey dusts off the back of his jacket.

“What, you mean reveal your little party trick? Orrr the fact that he ruined your little presumed dead ploy?”

“Both!” Tony scowls under his breath. “And now I gotta come in and do this. I do *not* miss these press conferences.

“You’ll be fine. Just stick to the cards Pepper made you.” They reach the double doors where Happy and two suited up guards stood waiting.

“Yeah-yeah,” Tony waves him off, grabbing the small deck of index cards Pepper had slid into his pocket before he rushed out the door last night as soon as the TV feed cut off.

“You ready Boss?” Happy asked, hand on the door. “You got your vest on?”

“Yeah, Hap. I’m all good. You got the guards posted?”

Happy nods. The entire event was rushed together as quickly as humanly possible before things could get too far out of hand. The speculation had already begun about Tony and this unnamed mystery man that could somehow melt through metal body armor, crush a skull with his bare hands, and absorb bullets like they were nerf pellets. Some thought he worked for Hydra, others thought he worked for Tony... and then there were those select few conspiracy theorists that thought it was Tony himself... of course, just this once, those insane conspiracy theorists just so happened to be accurate, but Tony was *not* about to give them the satisfaction of knowing that. He’s glad he wore the prosthetic... that’d be a dead giveaway.

“Let’s go.”

Happy pushes open the door, and Tony steels his expression as he walks into the room. An uproar follows him to the podium, a jumble of screamed questions and accusations. His guards stationed in front of the slightly elevated stage had to physically push the mob back when they tried to reach him.

“Everyone calm down, and sit!” Tony commands as soon as he reaches the microphone. His loud voice booms around the room and the room quiets as they submit to his heated instruction.

“Thank you. We are not wild animals, so let’s act like it.” He says. “Now, this is how this is going to work-- hi, yes. I am alive. Thank you... calm down.” He smiles politely and waves dismissively when a select few in the front just couldn’t keep their traps shut any longer. “It’s been a while, but we’ve all done this before. I am going to stand up here and say my bit, and you all will remain quiet while I do so. Questions will be left for the end.”

Tony goes through the speech that Pepper wrote for him, and God, the miracles his wife could pull. She wrote this in minutes, knowing he’d be storming out of the house as soon as he had the chance. It was quite amazing.

“...The man you saw in the footage did have a part in helping me and my family escape from our captors, but he is in no way, shape, or form, associated with me or Stark Industries. Neither with Hydra. No he is not made of metal. No he is not made of fire. No he is not the Devil Incarnate coming to cast judgement on the human race,” he rolled his eyes at that one. Did people actually believe that? Sounded ridiculous. “I can guarantee--”

“Mr. Stark,” a blonde in the front row interrupts, throwing her hand in the air. “How can you guarantee any of this if you are not personally associated with this mysterious man? How can you be so sure he isn’t working for Hydra. Our own President was associated--”

“Ok, ok, Ms..” Tony waves his hand to cut her off. “Don’t read into it. This is just an act of terror by Hydra, meant to scare people--”

“Isn’t that what Hydra did last night when he killed our President?” She interrupts again with a snap to her tone. “There wouldn’t be a need for them to make this up.”

Tony frowned. He did not like her one bit.

“If I wasn’t mistaken Mr. Stark. I’d say your lack of curiosity and surprise about this so-called Man of Metal goes to say you’re not sharing the full story. You are a man of science, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’m not sharing the full story,” Tony scoffed. “There are some details, the public does not need to know about and it’s as simple as that. The more I say on the matter, the more people will speculate the extent of my involvement in the events that happened.”

“So you admit you did have an involvement!” Another voice called from the back. A pudgy bald man jumped up from his seat, holding a pen and legal pad. “Are you working with this man to take down Hydra?”

“Was this man there to kill *you*, Mr. Stark?” Another voice, to his right. “Are you the *real* villain of this story? How do we know you aren’t answering to Hydra also?”

Tony scowls.

“Sit down!” He shouts, body vibrating with one long tremor. He represses the heat crawling up his spine-- he’s becoming especially good at that, he’s proud to admit -- and all four reporters slowly take their seats. “I will say this once, and only once.”

The room goes quiet as they all wait with pens in hand to record his words.

“I am not God, and I am not the Devil. I’m not the hero the world needs, nor am I the villain most expect of me. I am who you’ve always known me to be...” “ he stares down at the cards in his hand, then looks back up at the crowd with a smirk playing on his face.

“The truth is... I’m just Tony Stark.”

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who's interested...

Harley's gun inspo: (y'all know I don't do these picture links often so you gotta know it's good)

<https://www.ballisticmag.com/expensive-guns-market/>

It's the Wilson Combat Classic Supergrade (and yes I DID google most expensive guns, don't judge)

Also, just a quick little cultural fact about the Italian naming traditions. The firstborn male would be named after his paternal grandfather (but Harley is not getting Howard's name so... he gets his dad's name instead which is technically his great-great grandfather's name... so it works). Then the second male would be named after the maternal grandfather. Which I feel wouldn't be as meaningful to Peter since Pepper's father isn't even in this fic.. so Peter gets her name. Simple as that. So yeah... fact of the day I guess. I thought it would be a pretty nifty thing to throw in.

Anyways... It's really over guys. I can't believe it. The end of an era. This is a really bittersweet moment for me... I don't really know what to think. This fic got me through some really tough times and I just can't believe it's actually over. I've never felt this way about any of my other fics before. Then, it had usually been relief that it was finally over, but this just hits different. Idk. I thought I was just putting off this last chapter this whole time because I just didn't want to write... but I think I was also kinda holding out because I didn't want this wonderful journey to end. But I'm glad it finally has. I can close this chapter of my life and begin the next one!

But when it comes down to it I'm honored to have taken this journey with you all. And I don't care what any haters might come on here and say, because you jerks are all out there, I am DAMN proud of this fic and I think I always will be. I love you guys, and I hope to see you all for the sequel so we can go through this roller coaster all over again lol XD.

Thank you... from the bottom of my heart.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!